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## **Precarity Beyond Food: How the Closure of an Independent Grocery Store Shed Light on the Limitations of Food Access Efforts in Syracuse, New York**

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## **ABSTRACT**

On September 11, 2017, the owner of an independent grocery store in Syracuse, New York's Near Westside neighborhood announced that the store would close within the month. The Near Westside is often characterized by its high levels of concentrated poverty for African American and Hispanic neighborhood residents. Nojaim Brothers Supermarket opened in 1919 and persisted for 97 years amidst an unfavorable political and economic landscape marked by the creation of both chain grocery stores and supermarkets as well as the effects of urban renewal and disinvestment. I argue that Nojaim's endurance can be attributed to the embeddedness of the grocery store. In the last two decades, supermarkets and large corporations have normalized food desert logic as the dominant way of understanding food access, so much so that a Syracuse nonprofit used the food desert concept to successfully garner both resident and public support for a grocery store in a neighborhood that had been void of physical food access for decades. The public support is exemplary of the limited ways in which local scholars, practitioners, and politicians are (or aren't) thinking about food access in relation to poverty. Through an eight-month ethnography at a soup kitchen in the Near Westside, I show that while food access may not be residents' most pressing challenge, there is space for scholars, practitioners, and politicians to engage in food justice, making the connections between inadequate housing, lack of employment, substandard healthcare, and food.

PRECARITY BEYOND FOOD:  
HOW THE CLOSURE OF AN INDEPENDENT GROCERY STORE SHED LIGHT ON THE  
LIMITATIONS OF FOOD ACCESS EFFORTS IN SYRACUSE, NEW YORK

by

Katherine Louisa Ravene Mott

B.S., SUNY College of Environmental Science and Forestry, 2015

Thesis

Submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of  
Master of Science in Food Studies

Syracuse University  
December 2019

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## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The people who deserve the greatest acknowledge for the completion of this work will likely never see the pages that follow. I spent eight months with Near Westside soup kitchen “regulars” who welcomed me with open arms and forgave me for my often-privileged assumptions. Two women in particular let down their walls, invited me into their homes, and taught me lessons I’ll keep at the forefront of my mind for many, many years to come. I owe a huge thank you to Paul Nojaim, in particular, for his continued patience and vulnerability each time I came running back for more insight on such a deeply personal matter.

My interest in food studies first developed from undergraduate coursework with Laura-Anne Minkoff-Zern and quickly blossomed when working with the inspiring folks at Food First who took a chance on a young engineering student. Eric Holt-Giménez, Marilyn Borchardt, Leonor Hurtado, and Rowena Garcia warmly welcomed me into the family of food justice activists and are at the heart of my choice to pursue graduate work.

My thesis committee welcomed my many knocks on each of their doors. Evan Weissman’s unwavering support and advocacy helped me see the end of the graduate school tunnel time and time again. He has become more than an advisor, but a mentor, ally, and dear friend. Gretchen Purser’s genuine appreciation of the innerworkings of my brain has helped grow my confidence in a world seemingly unfamiliar to me. Rick Welsh’s sarcasm softened the blow of his sometimes blunt, yet always valuable insight. He managed to keep me laughing through it all.

My cohort turned great friends turned roommates, Cheyenne Schoën and Maegan Krajewski, kept me afloat. They stood by my side at each step of the research process, acting as sounding boards and cheering me on with ice cream, donuts, and motivational cheesecakes (after all, this *is* a food studies program). I am both grateful and inspired to have been in the presence of two scholars so compassionate and intelligent as them. Thank you both for helping me figure this whole “thesis” thing out. I could not have asked for better people to endure the highs and lows of graduate school with.

From a young age, my parents made it a priority to teach me how to care about people. My dad taught me the importance of seeing past the surface and my mom taught me to help where and when I can. I hope that I am doing right by both of you.

My wonderfully goofy cat, Marlowe, kept me company through the long nights and laid down on my keyboard when she knew it was time for me to get some rest. Brian Hennigan has been a pleasant surprise and a breath of fresh air. His constant willingness to talk through ideas and provide feedback has helped me become a better scholar, thinker, and writer. His love and support are unmatched.

If there is one thing I have learned while writing this thesis, as cliché as it sounds, it is that there is no such thing as good timing. Through these past two and a half years, I experienced grief, trauma and loss on several occasions. I owe endless thanks to my friends who have been with me for so long now, sitting with me in the foggy darkness and celebrating with me once it passes. Teagan Dolan, Zack Boerman, and Jack Ganley, I love you all so very much.

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## I. INTRODUCTION

Many food studies scholars look outside the grocery store. Citing its numerous failures to provide quality employment and its strong ties to transnational corporations that reproduce systemic inequalities, many look toward alternative food movements. But, as critical food studies scholar Ashanté Reese argues, “The overwhelming majority of U.S. citizens depend on grocery stores to meet most of their food needs. To ignore them is antithetical to understanding the everyday food geographies of the masses” (2019, p. 132). When a local independent grocer announced in September 2017 that his nearly 100-year old grocery store would close within the month, I saw an opportunity to intervene in the urban conventional food landscape. Thus, I set out on a journey to better understand this particular grocery store and its surrounding neighborhood.

Many scholars heavily critique the food desert concept, where grocery stores are the assumed proxy for food access. This concept neglects to acknowledge the many other economic, social, and political factors that inhibit food access. These critiques lead scholars in a logical direction away from grocery stores and towards better understanding the complex dynamics of trying to obtain food when living in poverty. Adjacent to this, scholars in the realm of public health study the many ways in which grocery stores improve the consumption of “healthier” foods in low-income neighborhoods. Public health practitioners and scholars view poor people as undereducated in regard to nutrition education and implement approaches within grocery stores that attempt to change poor people’s purchasing behaviors. My research builds from the works of Tracey Deutsch (2010), Melanie Bedore (2013), Jerry Shannon (2014), and Ashanté Reese (2019), who have taken intersectional approaches in contextualizing grocery stores within political economy and the rise of neoliberalism. Reese speaks to the importance of looking past

the food desert concept and “seeing the agency of the people and institutions in these neighborhoods” (2019, p. 132). I first contextualize the persistence and eventual demise of a local, independent grocery store in broader political economy before analyzing how people make meaning of the presence or absence of a grocery store. These findings contribute to larger conversations around food justice and expanded support for social welfare programs.

Studying the alternative food movement is undoubtedly important but studying conventional grocery stores and the broader political economy within which they function is crucial to understanding the most widespread effects of capitalism and neoliberalism on food accessibility. Further, food access cannot be adequately explored without considering the wages of consumers vis-à-vis the cost of food. Karl Marx (1978 [1867]) speaks to the “forest of uplifted arms” whose lives become ever more precarious as society remains both unconscious of and/or silent about the destructive effects of capitalism.

A mass of petty industrialists and small rentiers are hurled down into its ranks and have nothing better to do than urgently stretch out their arms alongside those of the workers. Thus, the forest of uplifted arms demanding work becomes ever thicker, *while the arms themselves become ever thinner* (p. 216, emphasis added).

When we fail to understand how people interact both with each other and the market in which they have been chained to through capitalism, solutions will remain palliative at best. People will remain hungry, unemployed, in inadequate housing, and in poor health if we continue to ignore the complex yet rather apparent structures and systems at play.

### **Nojaim Brothers Supermarket**

Nojaim Brothers Supermarket, herein Nojaim’s, was located in Syracuse, New York’s Near Westside neighborhood, a predominantly Black and Latino residential area, where, as of 2017, 48.5% of residents live below the federal poverty line. On September 11, 2017, Paul

Nojaim,<sup>1</sup> owner of Nojaim's, announced that his grocery store could no longer economically compete and would cease operations by the end of the month. Six months prior to Nojaim's closure in the adjacent Southside neighborhood, a PriceRite<sup>2</sup> chain grocery store opened. These drastic changes to the landscape of two poor neighborhoods allowed me to speak directly with residents to understand the felt impacts and revisit the ways in which scholars, politicians, practitioners and activists conceptualize and address urban food access. The ways in which residents make meaning out of the local, independent grocery store and its loss further contribute to understanding urban food access.

Nojaim's closure and PriceRite's opening ignited conversations that shed light on how nonprofit organizations, members of foundations, and politicians each perceive underserved, poor neighborhoods and correspondingly understand food access. Most practitioners and policy makers are missing the mark in connecting food inaccessibility to broader systems and structures that cause poverty. Because of this, dominant approaches remain rooted in paternalizing the poor for their assumed substandard eating habits and assumed lack of nutrition education, both of which stem from and connect back to the culture of poverty (Lewis, 1966), where poor people's class position is based solely on their individual choices and, thus, their inability to lift themselves out of poverty (Bowen et al., 2019).<sup>3</sup> After spending eight months in the Near Westside eating and speaking with residents at a neighborhood soup kitchen, the limitations of practitioners and policy makers' efforts regarding food access were clear. Through ethnography,

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<sup>1</sup> With permission from Paul Nojaim, I chose to disclose both the name of the grocery store I studied as well as the name of the owner. His perspective is rather unique from all other research participants and hard to mask. By choosing not to anonymize Paul, I avoid misconstruing opinions of other interviewees with those of the owner of the grocery store I studied.

<sup>2</sup> People refer to the grocery store as both "PriceRite" and "Price Rite." In this thesis, I refer to the grocery store as "PriceRite" except for when directly quoting articles or research participants.

<sup>3</sup> Lewis (1966) developed the "culture of poverty" to theorize how people develop adaptive approaches to survive in poverty, but, ultimately, these approaches prevent poor people from ever moving out of poverty.

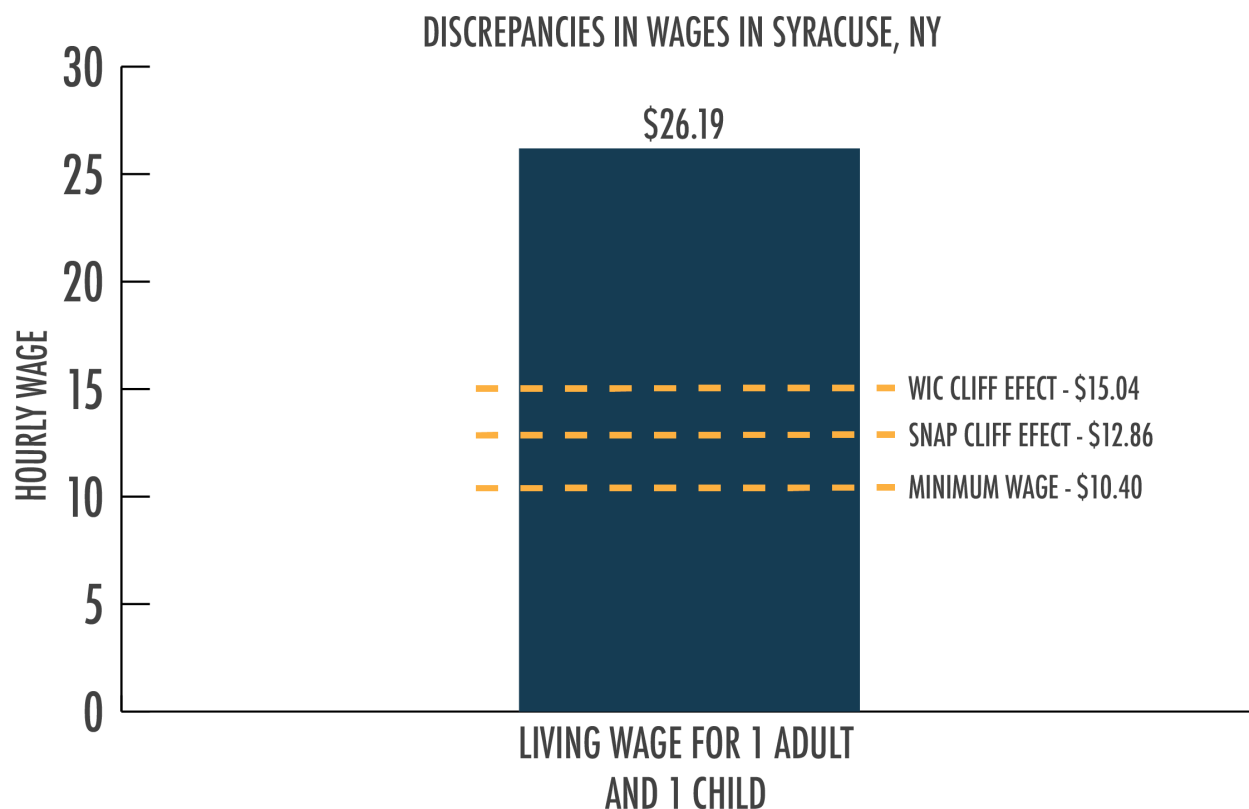
I learned the many pressing struggles Near Westside residents face, several of which are tied to their interactions with the state social safety net programs. In a time when the United States government deems poor people incapable, uneducated and lazy (Hays, 2003; Edin and Shafer, 2015), I show how Near Westside residents are constantly fighting for their livelihoods and navigating class social dynamics marked by stigma and judgment.

### **Syracuse, NY and the Near Westside**

As a post-industrial city, Syracuse, New York is one of many U.S. cities that has struggled to recover from massive declines in manufacturing, white flight, and suburban sprawl over the past 50 years. Alongside the loss of Syracuse's manufacturing industry is the increasingly fissured economy that has resulted in low-wage and precarious employment (Weil, 2017; Doussard, 2013; Standing, 2011). Many Syracuse residents today often do not have access to adequate jobs, putting pressure on their ability to obtain and afford basic needs such as food, housing, transportation, and healthcare. The City of Syracuse published a report focused on residents living in poverty, stating that, "62% of households in Syracuse did not make enough to cover basic cost of living expenses in 2016" (City of Syracuse, 2018). While Syracuse is often marketed by news outlets as an affordable city for young professionals, many residents already living in Syracuse struggle to afford their rent or mortgage payment (Healy, 2015).

The Living Wage Calculator, developed by MIT, suggests that two adult Syracuse residents working full time with one child would both need to make \$14.28 per hour to afford all of their basic needs and not rely on the social safety net, but minimum wage in for Syracuse is \$10.40 per hour (MIT, 2019). A single adult Syracuse resident working full time with one child would need to make \$26.19 per hour to afford all of their basic needs and not use the social

safety net, but, again, Syracuse’s minimum wage falls well below this threshold (MIT, 2019; Figure 1).



*Figure 1. Discrepancies in Wages in Syracuse, NY (MIT, 2019). “Cliff effect” is a term used to describe the point at which someone will lose access to full or partial entitlements. At \$12.86 per hour, a single adult with one child will begin to lose the full allotment of SNAP benefits (\$353/month). For example, at \$15.04 per hour, a single adult with one child will no longer qualify for WIC benefits. Both the \$12.86 and \$15.04 hourly wages fall beneath the living wage of \$26.19 per hour.*

The above predicament is one of many situations faced by residents living in a city with some of the highest poverty rates in the U.S., with particularly high rates among Blacks (41.0% poverty in 2017) and Hispanics (45.1% poverty). According to the Opportunity Atlas (Figure 2), a child that grows up in Syracuse is projected to make on average \$16.00 per hour working on average 27 hours per week when they are in their 30s, equating to an annual individual salary of roughly \$23,000.<sup>4</sup>

<sup>4</sup> If this child is Black or Hispanic, their projected annual individual salary falls to \$19,000 and \$21,000, respectively. Three quarters of children that grow up in Syracuse are projected to remain in the same commuting zone in their 30s, suggesting that their access to employment, not factoring in broader economic changes, will remain roughly the same (U.S. Census Bureau, 2019). A child living in the southern portion of the Near Westside (Census Tract 40) is projected to make \$13,000 per year in their 30s, with an 80% chance that they’ll remain in the



# PROJECTED HOUSEHOLD INCOME OF CHILDREN WITH LOW-INCOME PARENTS

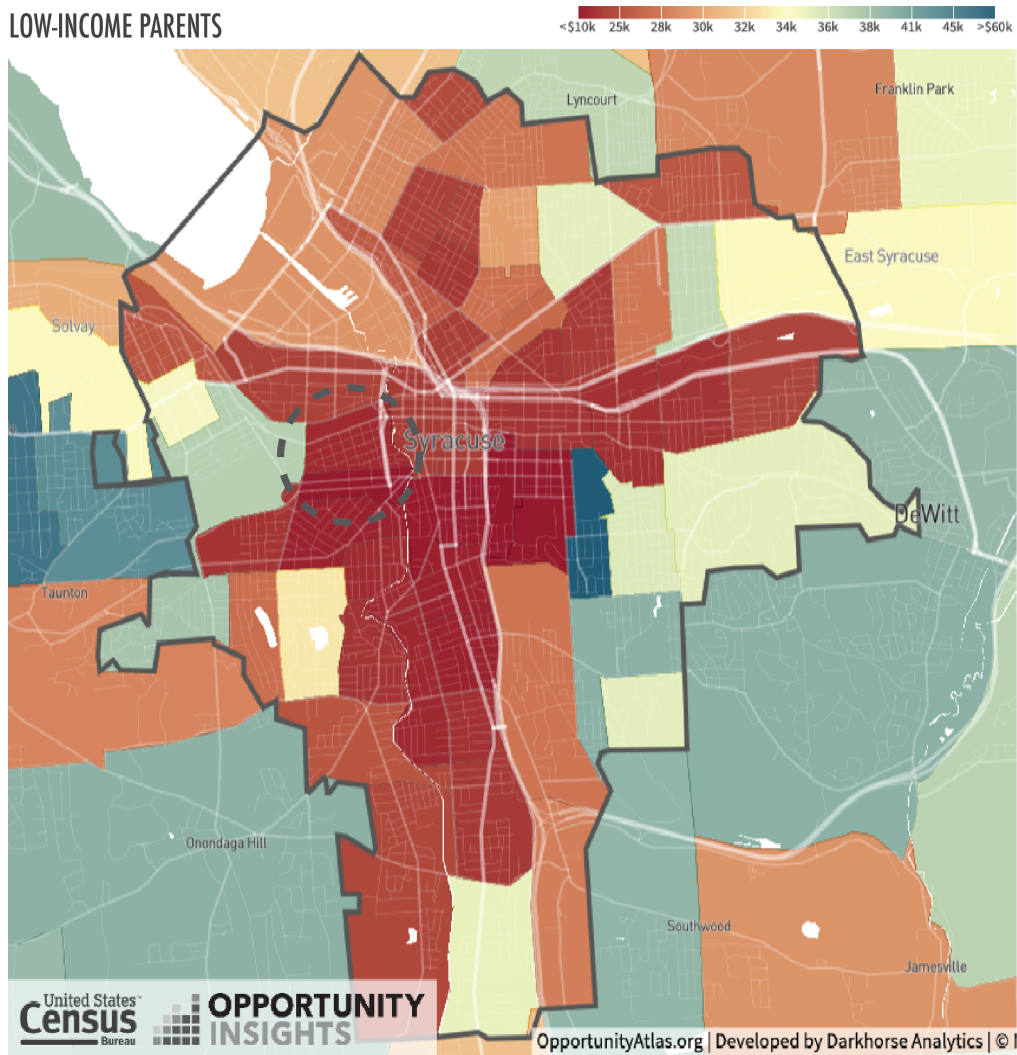


Figure 2. Projected Annual Incomes for Children Raised in Syracuse, NY (Opportunity Atlas, 2019). The Near Westside neighborhood is outlined in grey.

In 2016, Governor Cuomo created the Empire State Poverty Reduction Initiative (ESPRI) to award funds to 16 cities across Upstate New York to develop programming that targets concentrated poverty (Governor's Press Office, 2016). Within Syracuse, there are 19 census tracts designated to have concentrated poverty, where at least 40% of residents fall beneath the

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same commuting zone (U.S. Census Bureau, 2019). A child living in the northern portion of the Near Westside (Census Tract 30) is projected to make \$19,000 per year in their 30s, with a 75% chance that they'll remain in the same commuting zone (U.S. Census Bureau, 2019). Black males that grow up in the northern portion of the Near Westside (Census Tract 30) are projected to have a 25% chance of incarceration compared to 4.7% incarceration rate for the entire census tract (U.S. Census Bureau, 2019).

poverty line (Shapiro et al., 2015) (Figure 4). Two of the 19 census tracts, 30 and 40, make up the Near Westside, the research site for this thesis.

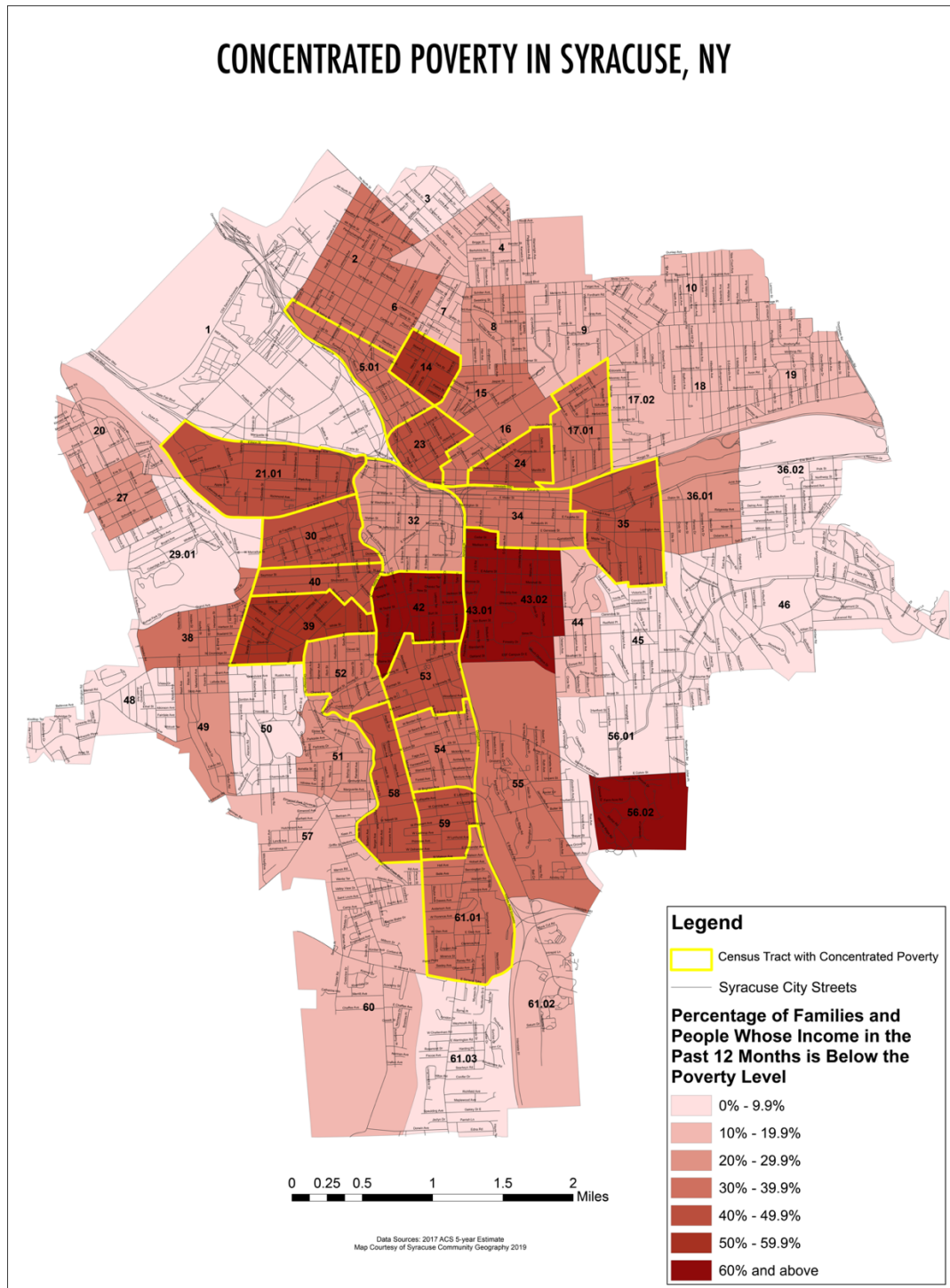


Figure 3. Syracuse, NY Census Tracts with Concentrated Poverty. Map courtesy of Syracuse Community Geography.

In the Near Westside, a predominantly Black (50.1%) and Hispanic (27.1%) neighborhood, 48.5% of residents live at or below the poverty line, 60.3% of whom did not work in the past year.<sup>5</sup> Home ownership rates, educational attainment, and median household income are drastically lower in comparison to both the city of Syracuse and nationally (Table 1).

*Table 1. Poverty, education, home ownership, and income at neighborhood, city, and national levels.<sup>5</sup>*

	Near Westside	Syracuse, NY	United States
<b>Poverty</b>	<b>48.5%</b>	<b>32.6%</b>	<b>14.6%</b>
<b>In Poverty, Did Not Work in the Past Year</b>	<b>60.3%</b>	<b>44.9%</b>	<b>22.5%</b>
<b>Median Household Income</b>	<b>\$20,202</b>	<b>\$34,716</b>	<b>\$57,652</b>
<b>Rate of Home Ownership</b>	<b>18.6%</b>	<b>38.3%</b>	<b>63.8%</b>
<b>Received Bachelor's Degree or Higher</b>	<b>3.7%</b>	<b>27.4%</b>	<b>30.9%</b>

Governor Cuomo's ESPRI program is one of many attempts to target structurally disadvantaged populations in Syracuse. The Near Westside in particular has long been a focus of many non-profit and faith-based organizations, academic institutions, and healthcare groups working to "address poverty." Collaborative groups, such as the Near Westside Initiative (NWSI), have attempted to grapple with symptoms of poverty through economic development, artwork installations, and nutrition and health education. The NWSI, developed through Syracuse University, created partnerships with several Near Westside businesses to implement programming and spread awareness of the initiative in the neighborhood (Marshall, 2016). As a non-resident of the Near Westside, my first visit to the neighborhood spoke to the long-time lack of investment by the city in its residents:

As I approach the Near Westside, I pass under a bridge painted red with the words "MISSION DISTRICT" in white. The opposite side says "LIVES CHANGE HERE." I continue driving to see a line of about twenty people waiting outside an emergency food program. I notice a corner store that sells soda and cigarettes. Another store is marketed as an ethnic foods store, selling Hispanic foods. I go

<sup>5</sup> "Near Westside" refers to data from Census Tract 40. All data were obtained from the U.S. Census Bureau American Community Survey 5-year estimates, 2013-17.

inside to find out that it sells typical corner store foods, with a very limited selection of shelf sturdy Goya products. A church promotes itself with two straightforward banners that say, “SINNERS WELCOME” and “WHO AM I TO JUDGE?” A glass case that probably once housed a fire extinguisher now houses a “free library,” containing two shelves of tattered, old books that were free to borrow. I sit in the parking lot of a primary care center and watch as people file in and out with varying ailments, arriving by taxi, car, medical transport, and foot. Many people are not wearing warm clothing or close toed shoes even though it’s a blistery, winter day. Across the parking lot is a former independent grocery store. The entrance is boarded up with graffiti covered plywood (Field notes, January 2018).

The physical character of the immediate area was not only illustrative of the high levels of poverty in the neighborhood, but also the high levels of involvement by charitable and faith-based organizations. The already segregated Near Westside offers a cheap place to reside following graduation from a religious or city-funded rehab program. A public housing development, James Geddes Housing Development, comprises 39 residential properties in the form of rowhouses and additional residencies in two high rise apartment buildings that cater to senior citizens. Built in 1955, the James Geddes Housing Development is owned and maintained by the Syracuse Housing Authority (SHA, 2018), which acts as public housing agency for low-income and/or disabled city residents.<sup>6</sup> Many residents I engaged with for this thesis resided in the James Geddes Housing Development and relied on benefits from social welfare programs, such as Public Assistance, Social Security Disability Income, and Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP), as well as charity, to get by.

Within a few blocks of each other exist a doctor’s office for scheduled appointments as well as a health clinic for more urgent matters. The Near Westside made national news when *The New York Times* publicized the neighborhood’s recent surge in synthetic marijuana overdoses,

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<sup>6</sup> One of the Syracuse Housing Authority’s public housing developments, Pioneer Homes, is the oldest of its kind in New York state and one of the earliest public housing developments in the country. Now, foundations and nonprofit organizations are working with the Syracuse Housing Authority to redesign and restructure Pioneer Homes and the surrounding neighborhood (Eisenstadt, 2019) through a new version of “urban renewal.”

more commonly referred to by residents as “spike” (Featherstone, 2015). A church in the neighborhood functions as a major source of charitable operations, including a weekly soup kitchen, consignment store, and neighborhood programming targeted at supporting young and single mothers.

Another news report describes a former traditional high school in the Near Westside: “Fowler High School never had a chance... The school hasn’t graduated even half of its seniors on time in a decade. A former principal told state officials a few years back that parents – 85 percent of whom have low or no incomes – ‘are not really involved in their children’s education’” (McMahon, 2017). The high school has since transitioned to an alternative education format that targets students struggling academically (Riede, 2014). The Westside Academy at Blodgett is a middle school that remains open in the Near Westside while a significant portion of the building has been condemned due to asbestos (McMahon, 2017a). An interviewee recounted a story of a female Westside Academy student coming home to her mother, complaining that she didn’t want to drink from the water fountain at school because it was brown. School administrators have long awaited funds to renovate the school, but with funding contingent on student performance, the likelihood that the school will receive funding anytime soon is slim (McMahon, 2017b). Rather than addressing the physical learning environments of students, faculty, and staff, the New York State Education Department plans to reinvent the school by introducing “different staffing, instructional practices and school environments” in an effort to achieve better student performance (Mulder, 2018).

Near Westside residents I spoke with were quick to highlight other byproducts of living in poverty, such as the lack of access to social welfare programs, the long waiting lists associated with securing public housing, and inability to pay rent. In the midst of dealing with these issues,

Near Westside residents received news that the neighborhood's longstanding independently owned, full-service grocery store was going out of business.

## **Research Questions**

This thesis aims to simultaneously unravel and complicate the function, closure, and aftermath of an independently owned, full-service grocery store in the Near Westside. I argue that many narratives explaining Nojaim's closure, each problematic and complex in its own way, have emerged and thus bring forward quite a few questions I hope to explore: What led to the closure of Nojaim's and how has the closure affected the livelihoods of people living in the immediate neighborhood? In an effort to build upon debates around and conceptions of urban food disparities, how do grocery stores become sites for the state to shift responsibility and reproduce structural inequalities? How do local government and practitioners understand food insecurity and correspondingly employ measure to reduce it?

## **Overview of Chapters**

Ultimately, I aim to intervene in discussions around how the obesity epidemic undergirds most contemporary approaches to food access, the concept of the food desert, and corporate welfare's role in normalizing food desert language. Chapter 2 explains the mixed-methods approach I took to understand the social, political, and economic complexities surrounding Nojaim's existence, closure, and absence. In the following chapter, Chapter 3, I explore the political and economic processes that led to the economic decline of most independent grocers in the 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> centuries. Nojaim's, however, was unique in that it was able to persist for 97 years despite the changing food retail landscape.

Moving into Chapter 4, I provide an overview of current debates around urban food access and healthy eating, revealing *how* Nojaim's persisted and how corporate welfare has

popularized a solution that most benefits large corporations rather than the people they claim to serve. These debates set the stage for Chapter 5, where I analyze what many interviewees referred to as the “nail in the coffin” for Nojaim’s. Municipal, county, and federal support for the development of a chain grocery store less than one mile from Nojaim’s created controversy not only between store owners and supporters, but between the two adjacent neighborhoods, the Near Westside and Southside. I argue that both the loss of Nojaim’s on behalf of city, county, and state decision making as well as the increased tensions amongst neighborhood residents could have been avoided had government entities engaged in more extensive and participatory evaluations of the project.

I interviewed, surveyed, and observed people from a wide spectrum of demographics. Research participants included many people who work or worked at Syracuse University, people who work at nonprofits in the Near Westside and Southside neighborhoods, people who were regular customers at both Nojaim’s and PriceRite, and people who couldn’t afford to go to either store. In Chapter 6, I show how people working on the ground are missing the connection between poverty and food (in)security, which translates to approaches that limit “the politics of the possible” (Herman et al., 2018).

Chapter 7 provides a deeper analysis of people living in extreme poverty in the Near Westside, those who thought of Nojaim’s as a friend more than a consistent food source. Given the push for social welfare programs to strengthen work requirements, specifically SNAP, I argue that policy makers and the broader public should reconstruct the definition of work to push for increased entitlements for all. Through my participant observation of soup kitchen attendees in the Near Westside, I show how people are constantly working to merely survive.

I conclude with thoughts on pushing towards a more comprehensive understanding of food access that considers employment, housing, healthcare, and those domains' undergirding political and economic structures.



## II. METHODS

### Positionality

Before I attempt to tell a story that is far from my own, it is necessary to acknowledge that I am a white, professional, 26-year old woman who enjoys the privileges that accompany these identities. My fieldnotes as well as the interpretation that follows are colored by my own experiences and can in no way be understood as objective. I do not aim to dismiss my own privilege but rather engage in as much reflexivity as possible throughout the duration of this thesis. I realize that by relishing in the analysis and critique that comes with a case study and academia, I could easily lose sight of the individual lives and broader communities that were affected so deeply by this matter. Although this work is in many ways self-serving, my goal is to help better understand the ways in which urban poverty is currently being problematized through the lens of food access. Avoiding “portraying members of the stigmatized group as helpless victims” (Link & Phelan, 2001, p. 16), I accept Small’s (2015) call for ethical consideration in representation:

The reader who pities the victim and the one who blames the victim share an understanding of the poor black or Latino woman, man, or child as the other, as representation of a problem first, and multidimensional human being a distant second, reinforcing stubborn stereotypes in the public at large that have endured for generations. A great irony of ethnographies of the urban poor may be that writing sympathetically has so often led to writing stereotypically (p. 354).

Throughout the research process, I consistently feared I would misrepresent research subjects, most commonly those who live in poor neighborhoods and who rely heavily on social welfare programs. So often, people’s attempts to amplify the lived experiences of poor people end up either reproducing false class-based stereotypes or provide an overly pitying, almost pornographic account of what it means to be poor. My hope is that anyone who reads this thesis can come away feeling sympathetic, but not be compelled to engage in reproducing stereotypes

that continue stigmatization of low-income individuals. I have broader, more meaningful messages to share than simply providing vignettes that could potentially reproduce stereotypes associated with the urban poor. Additionally, I extend the ethical consideration for representation beyond the urban poor to all research subjects I engaged with, regardless of class. As I strive to continue to do throughout this thesis, I directly confronted any personal feelings of pity, blame, or sympathy for research subjects by engaging in reflexivity when writing fieldnotes and upon completing semi-structured interviews.

### **Nojaim's as a Case Study**

By definition, a case study is defined by “interest in individual cases, not by the methods of inquiry used” (Denzin and Lincoln, 2000, p. 435). During my sophomore year at the State University of New York College of Environmental Science and Forestry (SUNY-ESF), a professor cemented my interest in Syracuse as he raised awareness about a few of the poor neighborhoods adjacent to the SUNY-ESF campus. Through walking tours and litter clean-up events in the Southside and Near Westside neighborhoods, my professor would reiterate to myself and my classmates that we do not need to leave Syracuse to “improve our world,” the slogan our environmentally-focused college prided itself on. In the years following graduation, my interest in food studies would develop in conjunction with my interest in the Syracuse community. I learned of Nojaim's as well as the Near Westside Initiative. I attempted (without success) to become involved in a grant writing opportunity that I believed at the time would be a great fit for Paul Nojaim's store. My well-meaning yet rather naïve intentions would not come to any sort of fruition until a few years later, when Paul announced on September 11, 2017 that the 98-year old grocery store would be closing. At the time, I had completed roughly two weeks of graduate school, but my previous years in Syracuse had already tinged my thinking and shifted

my perceptions in ways that could never be objective. The decision to focus on Nojaim's was, in many ways, personal to me, almost instinctual. I had already perceived from my own lived experiences that Nojaim's was much "bigger" than a grocery store. This longwinded explanation of choosing to explore Nojaim's as a case study is important, for it justifies Cindi Katz's statement that, "I am always, everywhere, in the field" (1994, p. 72).

My research questions aim to understand the details of how Nojaim's functioned within a poor neighborhood, what led to its closure, and how the loss of Nojaim's has affected the neighborhood, and then to extend these findings to "provide insight into an issue or to redraw a generalization" (Denzin and Lincoln, 2000, p. 437). For this study, I aim to connect empirical findings to broader, theoretical contemporary understandings of food access. "Thick descriptions" associated with intrinsic case studies such as mine allow researchers to explore minutiae and comprehensively understand a specific situation (Denzin and Lincoln, 2000, p. 439).

I have reservations in regard to the "damage [that] occurs when the commitment to generalize or to theorize runs so strong that the researcher's attention is drawn away from features important for understanding the case itself" (Denzin and Lincoln, 2000, p. 439). Expanding upon Widener's (2018) call to analyze food access through a framework that moves beyond spatial analyses, I developed a case study using a mixed methods approach. Quantitative and qualitative methods were used to examine my research questions, including participant observation, semi-structured interviews, comparative surveys and statistical analysis, and historical content analysis.

### *Nojaim's Customer Survey*

Upon hearing the news of Nojaim's closing and the narratives suggesting that the closure was due to the opening of a PriceRite grocery store in the Southside, an adjacent neighborhood to the Near Westside, there was very little time left to hear directly from Nojaim's customers regarding their experiences and future plans. While Paul announced he would close the store on September 11, 2017, he did not disclose an official date until the last week of operations. From October 1, 2017 until the day before Nojaim's ceased operations on October 7, 2017, I conducted a 16-question electronic customer survey (n=98) via Qualtrics.

With permission from the owner of Nojaim's, I stood in front of the entrance of the store and asked for people to take a quick survey on my cell phone, on which was loaded the Qualtrics customer survey. The purpose of the electronic customer survey at Nojaim's was to better understand where people were planning to shop once Nojaim's closed, at the time working under the assumption that Nojaim's was each customer's main grocery store. The survey was structured in three main parts. The first set of questions focused on motivations behind shopping at Nojaim's, distance travelled, the travel method (walking, car, bike, or taxi), and how long the customer had shopped at Nojaim's. The second set of questions asked customers where they planned to purchase their groceries following store closure, travel distance to that location, and travel method. The final set of questions covered demographics such as ethnicity, gender, income, education level, and household size.

Descriptive statistics for demographic information were developed using Qualtrics. The survey was only made available in English. This excluded most Spanish speakers and others who are not fluent sufficiently in English. While I was aware of this limitation in my own research methodology and attempted to have the survey translated into Spanish before the store closed,

the pressure to collect as much data as possible prior to the closure of Nojaim's remained the priority.

### ***Participant Observation***

From January 2018 to August 2018, I went to a soup kitchen – down the street from the closed Nojaim's – once a week for two to three hours to conduct ethnographic research in the Near Westside. The soup kitchen operates via volunteers from a neighborhood Catholic Church in one of the church's facilities that operates as both a gymnasium and auditorium. I ate with people living in the Near Westside neighborhood and attending from other parts of Syracuse.

Unlike food pantries which have strict geographic regulations on participation, the soup kitchen is open to anyone, regardless of the neighborhood in which they reside. The soup kitchen, as I detail later in this thesis, is attended most heavily by Near Westside senior citizens and residents who are disabled or living in poverty, often reliant on benefits via Public Assistance (PA), Social Security Disability Income (SSDI), Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP), and, of course, charity. Many of the people who rely regularly on the soup kitchen live in public housing located less than a block away.

Each week, I waited in line to get food and then sat down to eat and converse with others. I admit that initially I did not eat, but soon realized that, by eating, I was able to more easily engage with people also eating a free meal. The original aim of my research was to analyze residents' food access strategies in the wake of the loss of what I believed, and assumed, was their cornerstone grocery store. However, the Near Westside residents who most frequently attended the soup kitchen lived in poverty and made it apparent that food access was far less of a problem than was access to other resources, such as housing and healthcare. These residents relied almost entirely on emergency food systems and charitable programs; Many stock their

cupboards monthly through a neighborhood food pantry and rotate between soup kitchens at various churches, the Rescue Mission, and the Salvation Army. Corner stores, pharmacies, and discount stores are all within walking distance, stocked with nonperishable foods and a variety of drinks.

As often as my schedule allowed, I spent time with people from the Near Westside at the soup kitchen, but also in their own apartments, at restaurants and cafes, or at doctor's appointments. In total I spent roughly 100 hours in the Near Westside or with residents of the Near Westside conducting participant observation through what I would argue was a form of a "go-along" or "hanging out," which Kusenbach (2003) defines as accompanying participants in their routine activities, "asking questions, listening, and observing [to] actively explore [participants'] stream of experiences and practices as they move through, and interact with, their physical and social environment" (p. 463). In all of that time spent with Near Westside residents, I purposefully did not take notes or use any recording devices because I believed my ability to build rapport and true relationships with the people I encountered would be hindered by doing so. To record data, within 24 hours of each visit to the Near Westside or with Near Westside residents, I took detailed field notes, provided my own analysis of the visit, and read current debates within the literature to understand better how my observations were reflective of, or differed from, existing conversations and debates.

As Kristin Luker (2008) explains: "The research question often reveals itself at the end, or close to the end, of the research (this is, after all, a voyage of *discovery*)" (p. 61). My approach to participant observation was fluid and iterative. It entailed a mixture of inductive and deductive theoretical approaches that allowed me to deeply immerse myself in the neighborhood (Luker, 2008; Jerolmack and Khan, 2018). Inductively, I drew theoretical arguments *from* my fieldnotes.

Deductively, I built upon these theoretical contributions by visiting and revisiting related literature. Through the process I stayed focused on the specifics of the case itself (Denzin and Lincoln, 2000).

I engaged in reflexivity throughout my field note taking as often as possible, offering reflections on how my existence as a rather privileged, young, college-educated, food secure white woman affected the conversations, perceptions of myself and others, and experiences that occurred during fieldwork. The people with whom I developed relationships over the course of conducting my ethnographic research *are* marginalized, stigmatized individuals *just as much* as they are highly complex and multidimensional. The stories, emotions, and experiences I shared with Near Westside residents are ones that I hope to portray in an honest, accurate, and well thought out manner. All references to people I interacted with at the soup kitchen, as well as the name of the soup kitchen, are pseudonyms in an effort to protect personal information.

After I concluded participant observation of the soup kitchen, I compiled all field notes and used ATLAS.ti to read through and code each set of field notes. I identified initially the following common themes that emerged from the data collection: judgment, stigmatization, and lack of access to basic resources. To contextualize these themes, I additionally coded each set of field notes for references to Nojaim's, people's perceptions of me, and discussions specifically about the soup kitchen, its food, and volunteers.

Keeping Mario Small's (2015) call to "de-exoticize ghetto poverty" at the forefront of my mind each time I sat down to write field notes and when interacting with the research participants, I aimed to present a narrative that is subjective, but not exploitative in any way. However, I question if this aim is even possible to achieve. While this thesis provides rich accounts of research participants' lives in an effort to highlight structural factors inhibiting food

access, the research participants themselves are facing a reality much different than mine. I hope this thesis contributes to or in the development of a broader, yet more defined, push for social welfare policy change, but I cannot know that as of right now. Emerson et al. (2011) emphasize the importance of the researcher's orientation in field notes:

By self-consciously recognizing his fundamental orientation, the fieldworker can write fieldnotes that highlight and foreground issues and insights made available by that orientation. This recognition might also make him more sensitive to the ways his orientation shapes key interactions with others... The more the field researcher acknowledges those factors influencing his fundamental stance toward people in the setting, the more he can examine and use the insights and appreciations opened up by this stance in fieldnote writing (p. 91).

My research sits at the intersection of the fields of geography and sociology, in line with feminist epistemologies that push for acknowledgement of self in research (McDowell, 1992). I grappled with my positionality by often coming home to my roommate, who acted as a sounding board and listened to me reiterate the events of the site visit, understanding that providing any commentary prior to me fully finishing my field notes may externally influence the way in which I wrote the notes. Deliberating on site visits allowed for “self-critical sympathetic introspection and the self-conscious analytical scrutiny of the self as researcher” (England, 1994, p. 82).

### ***Semi-Structured Interviews***

I began conducting semi-structured interviews (n=15) alongside participant observation at the soup kitchen in February 2018. Semi-structured interviews shed a different light than the survey data or compiled ethnographic field notes. Where the first two methods voiced the concerns and viewpoints of those living in the Near Westside, interviews targeted professionals involved in food access, poverty, or public health related work in either the Near Westside or the Southside. A loosely structured interview guide helped when interviewees had less extensive responses and allowed for deeper conversations if interviewees felt strongly about a specific



topic. Interviews typically began with a general question about the interviewee's involvement with Nojaim's or their familiarity with the store to allow for "a sense of connection to develop between the interviewer and interviewee" (Adler and Clark, 2011, p. 253). Interviewees were either key informants or identified through snowball sampling techniques, where "members of a group of interest," as Adler and Clark (2011) state, help to "identify other members" (p. 125). For this case study, nonprofit organizations, foundation members, and elected officials all gave suggestions of who else I could speak with to further inform my research questions. Almost all were contacted via email. Interviews were transcribed using Express Scribe and then coded using ATLAS.ti to organize common perspectives and patterns within interview responses (Adler and Clark, 2011).

### ***Neighborhood Tours***

While conducting semi-structured interviews, I simultaneously used ethnographic techniques while taking two "neighborhood tours," one of the Near Westside and one of the Southside. The Near Westside tour was given by the former owner of Nojaim's. Although Paul Nojaim does not reside in the Near Westside neighborhood, many would consider him to be extremely knowledgeable about the neighborhood, as his family's involvement in the Near Westside spanned three generations through ownership of Nojaim's and neighborhood engagement extended far beyond the sliding doors of the grocery store. The objective of the Near Westside tour was to learn about the historical transformations of the Near Westside and develop a broader understanding of Nojaim's social and economic ties to the neighborhood.

Nojaim initially extended an offer to give a walking tour of the Near Westside in March 2018. I joined Nojaim and two women from Onondaga County's WIC office in July 2018 to walk around the neighborhood. During this time, Nojaim was looking to rent out space in the

then-vacant Nojaim’s building and invited the WIC employees, prospective lessees, along.<sup>7</sup>

Nojaim provided a detailed oral history of the development of the Near Westside neighborhood, providing meanings behind frequent terminology – and new neighborhood branding – used (i.e. “salt district”) and identifying changes in infrastructure and roadways over the course of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. While walking around the Near Westside with Nojaim and the two WIC employees, I jotted down shorthand notes that I typed up in further detail from memory immediately following the tour. The tour focused primarily on the northeastern-most portion of the Near Westside neighborhood, bounded within West Street Gifford Street, Oswego Street, and Marcellus Street.

The Southside tour was given by a longtime resident of the Southside neighborhood, current president of the Syracuse Chapter of National Action Network (NAN) and employee of Jubilee Homes of Syracuse, Inc. (Jubilee Homes), a multifaceted not-for-profit agency that has a long-standing food justice and urban agriculture program for youth and “job training” programs for welfare recipients.<sup>8</sup> As will be discussed in Chapter 3, Jubilee Homes spent much time and effort advocating for the development of a grocery store in the Southside neighborhood. The objective of the Southside tour was to understand the history of food access efforts in the neighborhood as well as the history of the community-backed grocery store coming to fruition.

On Thursday, August 9<sup>th</sup>, we took a walking tour of the Southside neighborhood. For this tour, I purposefully did not bring any audio recording or notetaking devices, for the Southside employee had declined being recorded at a previous meeting. We walked from the corner of South Avenue and West Onondaga Street to South Avenue and Bellevue Avenue, where the new

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<sup>7</sup> In September 2018, a few months after Paul’s neighborhood tour, WIC announced its decision to move into part of the former Nojaim’s building (Mulder, 2018).

<sup>8</sup> While local organizations market their programs as providing “job readiness” and “job training” skills, studies show that these approaches often provide participants with little to no marketable skills and encourage participants to take low-wage jobs (Purser and Hennigan, 2019).

PriceRite grocery store was located. Along the way, she pointed out what she felt were cornerstone operations or lack thereof within the Southside neighborhood. We walked through the Southwest Community Center, PriceRite, Jubilee Homes' Urban Delights community garden, and Spirit of Jubilee park. Similar to the Near Westside tour, I typed up detailed notes following the tour.

### ***PriceRite Customer Survey***

As I continued to conduct semi-structured interviews and observe neighborhoods during walking tours, I began what would become a month-long game of phone tag (less of tag, more of a chase), attempting to obtain permission to conduct a comparative electronic customer survey at PriceRite, to further examine the narrative that PriceRite (located on South Avenue) drove Nojaim's out of business by taking Nojaim's customer base. Getting permission from Paul was simple, for he has had positive, lasting relationships both formally with Syracuse University's Near Westside Initiative and personally with my advisor, Professor Evan Weissman.

I hit several road blocks in trying to conduct the survey at PriceRite. In May 2018, I spoke in-person with a PriceRite General Manager who said they would reach out to Wakefern, PriceRite's parent corporation, for permission. After weeks of hearing nothing back, I reached out via phone to the South Avenue PriceRite and was promptly copied on an email with the Human Resources and Community/Government Relations Director at Wakefern headquarters, William Britton. Over two months of phone tag ensued. Britton initially reached out having received my message from the South Avenue PriceRite General Manager, leaving a voicemail of how and where to contact him to discuss further. Numerous phone calls were placed through the months of June and July 2018, leaving voicemails each time. As a last-ditch effort, I emailed

Britton one final time. After finally receiving an email reply, we spoke over the phone and I discussed my interest in conducting a survey.

Before the survey was approved, Britton requested that I remove the final question in the survey that inquired whether customers had ever shopped at Nojaim's. The survey had a similar question that asked where PriceRite customers had previously shopped, but the more pointed question was added to the survey to discern more effectively how much of Nojaim's customer base began shopping at the South Avenue PriceRite. Email communication from Britton stated that, "The specific reference to Nojaim's in question 15 must come out for legal purposes."<sup>9</sup> Following the removal of that question and other very minor tweaks, the survey was approved. I spoke via phone with a General Manager at the South Avenue PriceRite prior to conducting the survey to discuss logistics. After conversations with management, I stood immediately inside the store, between two sets of sliding doors where all customers entering the store would pass by. Learning from the limitations of the Nojaim's customer survey, I provided a Spanish-translated electronic customer survey to PriceRite customers. I received n=6 customer surveys using the Spanish version, and n=98 customer surveys total. The PriceRite electronic customer survey was almost identical to the Nojaim's electronic customer survey, replacing the question from the Nojaim's survey that asked where customers planned to shop after the closure with a question that asked where customers shopped prior to PriceRite opening. Descriptive statistics for demographic information were developed using Qualtrics.

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<sup>9</sup> Copied on the email were Brett Annette, PriceRite Marketplace human resources generalist, Mary Kirk, PriceRite Marketplace district manager, and John Corpora, PriceRite Marketplace regional director. Britton did not elaborate on why a pointed question about Nojaim's would be of legal concern. In this regard, in coming pages I will explore how and why PriceRite was vilified in news articles asking if the Syracuse government in subsidizing PriceRite's entry into the market had "killed" Nojaim's.

I acknowledge the limitations and shortcomings of the survey data. The comparative surveys do not capture accurately where Nojaim's customers were shopping immediately following Nojaim's closing or in the period between October 2017 and August 2018. The Nojaim's survey has few Latino respondents for lack of Spanish translation. Additionally, neither survey asked whether the customer resided in the immediate neighborhood (e.g. Near Westside or Southside).

### ***Content Analysis***

To situate the case study, I compiled all available news reports, grant reports, opinion editorial pieces, and promotional videos related to Nojaim's and/or the South Avenue PriceRite. I read through all relevant Syracuse Industrial Development Agency (SIDA) meeting minutes [December 15, 2015, January 26, 2016, and March 9, 2016] to provide legal documentation of the development of PriceRite and agreements between PriceRite and the City of Syracuse. I then created a timeline of all developments related to PriceRite, identifying supporting statements found in the various types of textual media I acquired. To better understand effects of white flight and disinvestment locally, I first compiled photographs of grocery stores listed in publicly available business directories for Syracuse, known as the City of Syracuse Polk Directories. Then, using Microsoft Excel, I created a grocery store database to show changes in number of grocery stores in Syracuse over time.

### III. THE POLITICAL ECONOMY OF NOJAIM'S

The Dutch economic historian Jan DeVries argues that two features of economic life – often attributed to so-called precapitalist or primitive economies – had to be radically modified to enlarge demand. First, more families (or wage-earning individuals) had to become involved with the market, both as producers for sale and as buyers of consumption goods. Second, the disposition to satisfy only pre-existing levels and to work no more than these required – the so-called backward-sloping supply curve of labor – had to change (Mintz, 1985, p. 163).

Anthropologist Sidney Mintz is most recognized for his contribution to critical food studies and political economy literature through his 1985 book, *Sweetness and Power*. Herein, Mintz details the political economy of sugar, ultimately explaining sugar's role in promoting and fueling the rise of both colonialism and capitalism. Similar to Mintz's deep analyses of how sugar influenced capitalism, a main focus of this chapter is to analyze how the grocery store was used as a *vessel* for capitalism. Ultimately, this chapter aims to better understand how the transformation of *independent* grocery stores into *chain* grocery stores into supermarkets is in line with the rise of advanced capitalism in the United States. Through an examination of how Nojaim Brothers Supermarket (Nojaim's) operated as a grocery store throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> century into the early 21<sup>st</sup> century, we can begin to make connections to broader political and economic structures that influenced the dominance of supermarkets as well as understand the approaches and adaptations by Nojaim's that allowed for it to stay afloat long after many independent grocers closed up shop.

#### **Working to Eat**

As Mintz (1985) reflects in the opening quote, at the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, Americans were beginning to become both producers and consumers within the United States' capitalist economy, moving away from agrarian, subsistence lifestyles into wage-labor in factories and warehouses. Engaging in the formal labor sector meant that American workers developed a

dependence on capitalists: workers now needed wages to be able to consume, because workers no longer had the time or resources to produce their own food, shelter, or clothing. Workers' ability to consume, or their purchasing power, was now determined by the value of labor they produced or sold and, in turn, the wages they earned. A worker's ability to produce their own food at little to no cost while maintaining their employment quickly diminished, requiring workers to obtain foodstuffs from alternative sources. Tied to their jobs for survival, consumers became dependent on the capitalist independent grocer who sold the foodstuffs they could no longer grow themselves.

As Americans became consumers of a capitalist economy, the cost of food became extremely important. In the early twentieth century, Americans were spending roughly 43% of their income on food (Thompson, 2012). "When the US joined the First World War," Raj Patel explains, "food prices climbed by 19 per cent . . . More than ever, independent grocers felt the pressure to cut costs, since food buyers were prepared to go to great lengths to find cheaper food (2007, p. 224). Up until this point, independent grocery stores had been the dominant method of purchasing foodstuffs in the United States. At an independent grocery store, the grocer themselves would hand-select goods for customers based on customers' preferences. The first "self-serve" grocery store, "King Piggly Wiggly," opened September 11, 1916 in Memphis, Tennessee and acted as a mechanism to reduce the high costs of food resulting from World War 1 through reduced owner-customer interactions (Patel, 2007). In "self-serve" grocery stores, customers are no longer subject to dealing with the grocer and can make decisions for themselves. Historian and critical food studies scholar Tracey Deustch, who focuses on transformations in grocery stores, argued that the new "self-serve" approach to operating grocery

stores arose amid consumer concerns regarding inconsistencies with independent grocers as well as consumer demand for lower food prices (2010).

Scholars suggest that the demand for a different way to procure food was not only a result of the political economy in the early twentieth century, but also a result of the social dynamics of consumption (Deustch, 2010). The subjectivity of an independent grocer and lack of a formal pricing structure allowed for prejudice to influence both owner's selling and customers' shopping experiences. Independent grocers could offer different prices to customers of particular racial makeups, genders, or classes to discourage certain identities from shopping at their grocery store (Deustch, 2010; Steel, 2008). Some customers, enraged by these inconsistencies, resorted to opening their own retail cooperatives (Steel, 2008; Deustch, 2010). For most Americans, however, independent grocers were the principal method of shopping.

Independent grocers had the ability to offer credit to customers waiting to receive paychecks or struggling financially, but who still needed food to feed their families. Where the credit system was favorable for customers who had good relations with their independent grocer, there was stigma affiliated with borrowing money. The subjective nature of who independent grocers were willing to provide such credits limited the number and type of customers who could benefit from the system. From the independent grocer's perspective, customers receiving credit were seen as liabilities for the strong possibility that they would never pay the grocer back (Deustch, 2010).

When Clarence Saunders' opened the first "self-serve" chain grocery, customers now had the ability to physically select foodstuffs at their own pace and discretion rather than receive items from behind an independent grocer's counter. Independent grocers had an inventory of foodstuffs that consumers could either inquire about via phone or in person, but inventories and



quality of foodstuffs varied greatly. With the invention of the chain grocery store model, where grocer(s) owned multiple grocery stores with identical aesthetics and retail approaches, grocery shopping became a more consistent experience. The chain grocery store model's mass transit operations and intricate supply chains mitigated the inconsistencies resulting from independent grocery store inventories.

Socially, "self-serve" chain grocery stores "defused the racially and ethnically charged atmospheres of food stores and conventional food shopping," Deustch explains (2010, p. 52). Strolling through the aisles of a "self-serve" chain grocery store required far less in-store social interactions than waiting at an independent grocer's counter. In addition, the "self-serve" system eliminated financial risks for the grocer, but left customers who were financially struggling unable to purchase their preferred foodstuffs. "At the very least," Deustch (2010) explains, chain grocery stores, "offered respite from the communal norms and tensions that permeated neighborhood grocery stores. Neighbors were simply not as likely to know what a married woman served her in-laws or whether a family paid its bills on time if shopping was done in chain stores rather than neighborhood independents" (p. 53).



Figure 4. Nojaim's in the latter half of the 20th century (Baker, 2017).

Scholars assess the complex social dynamics of independent grocery stores as hindrances to their long-term success, but my research showed otherwise. In 1919, Nojaim's opened two locations: one in Marcellus, NY and the other in the Near Westside neighborhood in Syracuse, NY (Figure 5). The owner, Charlie Nojaim, managed the Near Westside store over the course of the first half of the twentieth century. Nojaim's, an independent grocery store, began its operations as grocers moved to the hands-off "self-serve" approach to selling foodstuffs. Ted,<sup>10</sup> a former director of a nonprofit working in the Near Westside, reflected on the nuances of Nojaim's as an independent grocery store towards the end its existence.

Paul would lend people money or groceries. He'd be like, "I know you're good for it, and you'll pay me back." And they would! Because that was the reputation of that family. And so that's why [the closure] just felt so much worse than [if it had been] a chain grocery store.

The Nojaim family's economic approach to selling groceries involved an informal credit system that lasted through its closure. Where scholars' note the inconsistencies and subjective nature

<sup>10</sup> Pseudonyms were given to all research participants, with the exception of Paul Nojaim.

associated with this approach, the Nojaim family *required* such an approach for their own survival. The economic makeup of the neighborhood resulted in Nojaim's receiving the majority of its profits at the beginning of each month, when the state replenishes residents' social welfare benefits (i.e. Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP), Women, Infant, and Children (WIC), Temporary Aid for Needy Families (TANF)). If Paul were to deny someone a short-term loan, the resulting impact would be two-fold: not only would someone go hungry, but he would lose future profits. Sandy, a priest in the neighborhood, illustrated this persistent need that both he and other folks working in the neighborhood were faced with over the latter half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century and into the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

We have a lot of people coming up here all of the time looking for food... They say, "We need milk and butter, [the food pantry] doesn't have that." They're always two jumps ahead of me. So, what was really convenient for me was... I'd give them a \$20 or \$25 voucher down at Nojaim's. And I'd simply call up down there and then they'd go down there and get their voucher. I don't have that access anymore.

Through his relationship with Paul, the priest was able to participate in the informal credit system and offer support to those in need. The immediate needs of people struggling to access food illustrate not only the lack of charitable services to adequately provide basic needs to families living in poverty, but also the lack of state support to provide adequate social welfare benefits. Nojaim's economic approach needed to meet its customers where they were financially for both parties' benefit.

As the chain grocery store model gained traction, independents were pushed to limit their services and adopt mass retailing approaches (i.e. buy in bulk, reduce customer-staff interactions, lower prices). In 1922, Nojaim's along with nearly a dozen other independent grocery stores formed a cooperative, Olean Wholesale Cooperative (Olean). Similar to chain grocery stores,

Olean had pooled the resources of every independent grocer so it could, as with chains, buy in bulk and at lower costs.

By the 1930s, chain grocery stores had solidified their place in the American economy. The model succeeded through the acquisition of smaller, independent grocery stores as well as decreasing advertising and marketing costs through a singular, streamlined process for each grocery store within a given chain (Deustch, 2010). However, the growth of the chain grocery store model would not come without widespread criticism. “In 1931 alone,” Deustch explains, “forty-four states debated more than a hundred anti-chain bills in their respective legislatures” (2010, p. 78). Throughout the 1930s and 1940s, consumers protested chain grocery stores for their subpar working conditions, monopolistic approaches, and, of course, prices.

In the 1930s, policymakers increased their attention to grocery stores, and to consumption and retail sales generally, through a number of politics – anti-chain store taxes (designed to ease the competitive burden on independent growers), relief and welfare programs, new sales taxes, and, by the mid-1930s, attempts to regain business prosperity via the National Recovery Administration (NRA). ... Although scholars have effectively demonstrated that concern with consumption shaped government policy for much of the twentieth century, the opposite was also true – concern with government policy shaped consumption (Deustch, 2010, p. 73).

The creation of the National Recovery Administration (NRA) was originally intended to combat the rise of chain grocery stores among other things. Ironically, the relief programs and sales taxes developed to slow the growth of chain grocery stores were ultimately a hindrance to independent grocers who could not economically afford to keep up with implementing new regulations (Deustch, 2010). What ultimately halted the chain grocery store balloon was anti-chain legislation that “taxed firms based on the number of stores they owned,” Deustch explains (2010, p. 137).

It is here that the bigger, independent grocery stores would win out and develop into what we refer to today as supermarkets.

Very large “independents” often discarded the notion of small neighborhood stores entirely, building instead massive supermarkets in abandoned warehouses and factories. Like those operated by national chain store firms, these stores featured self-service, limited personal attention, large arrays of goods, and promises of low prices. But they were much larger than even chain grocery stores and were often located away from residential neighborhoods (Deustch, 2010, p. 133).

With the implementation of anti-chain legislation, fewer, but bigger, grocery stores became more economically viable. Supermarket owners latched on to what independent grocers had already done – sell groceries while providing several different services, all under one roof. Yet supermarkets did not target all income groups like smaller grocers had done. Rather, the supermarket model was developed to attract middle-class and wealthier Americans who could shop for groceries and other material goods with ease and in an aesthetically pleasing environment. Roughly 1,200 supermarkets had opened across the country by 1936 – a time period where consumers were still protesting chain grocery stores, the United States was recovering from the Great Depression in the New Deal era, and World War II was on the horizon (Deustch, 2010).

### **Supermarkets for Suburbanites**

In 1937, the City of Syracuse published a “Residential Security Map” to establish areas of the city deemed financially viable and worth investing in, as well as areas that were not (University of Richmond, 2019; Figure 6; Table 2). A part of a broader, national trend, “redlining” resulted from municipal zoning laws that were implemented to limit what types of development could occur in urban, low-income areas. The term was most commonly used by banks, who refused to approve loans for economic development in “unfavorable” areas. Neighborhood residents who could afford to fled to other areas of the city as well as suburbs that had a higher quality of living. Syracuse’s redlining maps suggest that disinvestment was

recommended for the Near Westside neighborhood, labeled D4 and C7 on the map. At the time of publication, however, most Black residents resided in the locations labeled D5.

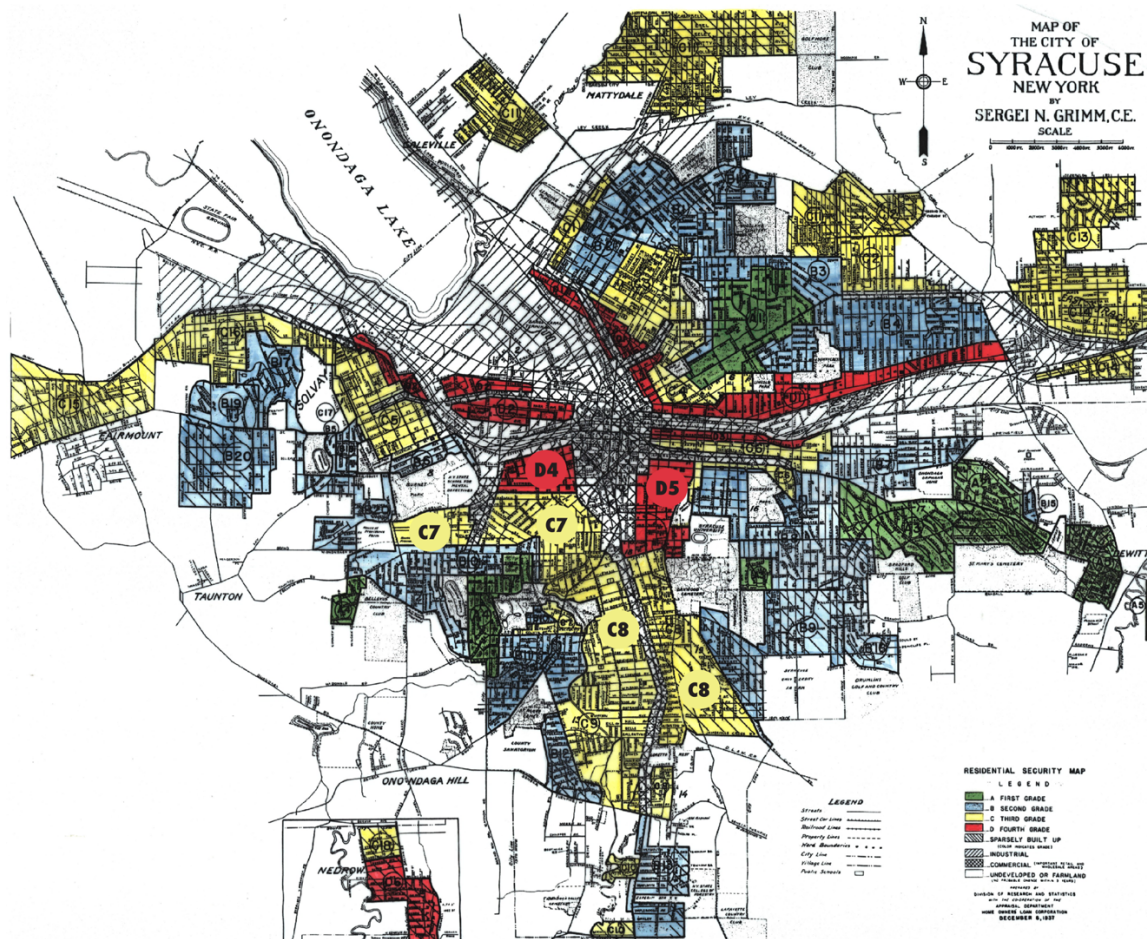


Figure 5. 1937 Map of Redlined Areas in the City of Syracuse (University of Richmond, 2019). Relevant labels were superimposed to be legible for readers.



*Table 2. Syracuse Neighborhood Redlining Descriptions with Present-Day Selected Demographics (University of Richmond, 2019; 2017 ACS 5-Year Estimates).*

<b>Neighborhood</b>	<b>Map Label</b>	<b>Redlining Description</b>
Near Westside and Westside	C7	“An old area now 95% developed. Houses are built on small lots and neighborhood is very congested... Section is convenient to a good business section on South Geddes Street and has good schools, churches and transportation. Pride of ownership is fair. Western portion is less desirable. Area warrants only a low third grade rating.”
Southside	C8	“An old area now 90% developed. Trend of desirability is downward as age and obsolescence become more pronounced. Section is very spotted with old one and two-family houses intermixed with here and there a noticeably newer unit. Pride of ownership is still fair and streets are moderately well maintained... The least desirable portion lies between W. Ostrander and Seneca Turnpike... Except for the newer buildings in the area, a buyer’s market prevails because of age of houses. Convenience to center of city, schools, churches and shopping centers is favorable, but heavy traffic through the district is hazardous in rush hours.”
Near Westside	D4	“95% improved - low flat land- inhabited by (predominantly) Poles and Italians. Almost entirely surrounded by industry - close to downtown center. Schools, churches. Encroachment of business and industry - proximity to RR with their smoke, noise, dirt - majority of buildings very old - many different types - ill kept - large houses have been converted into rooming houses; better class of laborers won’t reside here.”
15 <sup>th</sup> Ward	D5	“A very mixed area housing predominately Jewish and Negro families. Low flat land near the center of the city with good schools, churches and transportation. Section abuts Syracuse University to the south. Area is old and congested and in disrepair with evidence of vandalism- undesirable both as to improvements and class of occupant. A ‘U.S’ housing project in the western portion runs from Adams to Taylor and Renwich to Townsend- is a two-story project built to house 678 families. “

Redlining effectively discouraged the development of retail stores (including grocery stores) in urban areas and encouraged the development of retail on the outskirts of cities, where the land necessary for a supermarket was more readily available and cheaper to secure. In the 1930s, zoning laws promoted the development of supermarkets in suburbs; the 1956 Federal Highway Act cemented their success. The construction of the nationwide interstate system lowered transportation barriers both nationally and locally. Syracuse residents were now able to live outside of the city, where supermarkets and other amenities were most frequently being

developed, with the ability to still commute into the city for work. From 1950 to 1970, Syracuse experienced a 20,000 person decline in population as a result of economic development outside of the city (University of Richmond, 2019).

As Syracusans fled the city, then Mayor William Walsh was busy attempting to redevelop the neighborhoods deemed unworthy of investment. One urban renewal project focused on the 15<sup>th</sup> ward (labeled D5 in the 1937 redlining map).

William F. Walsh in the 50s spearheaded the Near East Urban Renewal Project that used federal funds for demolition and slum clearance and paved the way for millions of dollars of downtown development that can still be seen today: the Everson Museum of Art, Upstate Medical Center, the Presidential Plaza for middle-income housing, a city police station, and two parking lots (Ducre, 2012, p. 35).

In total, 1,198 families were displaced through Syracuse urban renewal projects such as these in the 1950s and 60s (University of Richmond, 2019). Roughly forty years later, in 2003, Mayor William Walsh stood with his choices.

We tore down a row of houses in the old 15<sup>th</sup> Ward and put up Everson Museum... I think the change was worthwhile. If you want to build up downtown, you've got to provide something there. If you want to build up the neighborhood, you have to have jobs so people can move into the neighborhood. You build your economy, and people will come (Walsh, quoted in Sieh, 2003, p. 40).

### ***Urban Renewal in the Southside***

Shortly after the Near East Urban Renewal Project, the construction of an interstate through the 15<sup>th</sup> Ward would commence, developing what many have considered to be a physical barrier to accessing resources on either side of the highway. The majority of the Black population resided in the 15<sup>th</sup> Ward up until urban renewal and highway development pushed 1,660 and 774 residents respectively to move elsewhere in the city (Ducre, 2012, p. 36). One area where residents of the 15<sup>th</sup> Ward could afford to relocate was the Southside. As the interstate was being constructed, more affluent residents living nearby the highway fled for the



suburbs. “Still facing challenges in finding affordable quality housing in the rest of the city, lower- and working-class Blacks replaced the former white residents in the South Side,” Kishi Ducre, African American Studies scholar at Syracuse University, explained (2012, p. 43). “Wealthier white residents,” Ducre continued, “whose homes were closer to the central business district near downtown sold their houses to white-collar businesses or these homes were ultimately abandoned. The urban renewal spurred a racial shift and economic decline of the South Side that is still evident today” (2012, p. 43). The once redlined areas of Syracuse were swiftly cleared of their population and repurposed for economic development and advancing transportation infrastructure.

### ***Urban Renewal in the Westside***

In the early 1960s, city planners built West Street as an arterial road to connect existing highways to future highways that ended up never coming to fruition. “More than 110 buildings were knocked down to create the West Street arterial, six lanes of traffic from Herald Place to West Onondaga Street, an arterial at the core of an expansive highway dream,” stated a local news columnist (Kirst, 2015; Figure 7). According to one interviewee, the resident-protested arterial road required fencing along the sidewalks, discouraged foot traffic from the Near Westside to downtown and acted as a physical barrier. Almost 60 years later, the fencing has been removed and crosswalks developed, but the disconnect of the Near Westside neighborhood to the greater city remains. Even given the well-meaning efforts of non-profit and charitable organizations working in the neighborhood, the challenges that Near Westside residents are facing every day are out of reach for precariously-funded organizations to permanently and adequately fix. Housing, healthcare, education, transportation, and economic opportunity remain inadequate for the majority of Near Westside residents.



Figure 6. Plans for West St. Expansion (Kirst, 2015).

In 1968, the Fair Housing Act would attempt to eliminate predatory and biased zoning practices such as redlining, but the effects both nationally and in the city of Syracuse were not easily reversible, if at all. Where urban, low-income areas were most negatively affected, the suburbs saw more positive outcomes. Highway development and urban disinvestment were large contributors to the success of supermarkets; driving people out of cities to the suburbs where vehicles were a necessity was key in ensuring the success of a grocery store with a mass retail approach. The supermarket model was dependent on procuring high volumes for lower costs and required a significant amount of space to store and display items, making the outskirts of cities and suburbs the perfect location (Steel, 2008; Shannon, 2016). Andrew Greenwald's *Wal-Mart: The High Cost of Low Prices* documents the process of a supermarket using accumulated capital to lower the prices of food in a new store location, drive out local business, and then raise prices (2005). Supermarkets drove business out of cities and into suburbs, necessitating a customer base that had vehicles. As supermarkets rose in both popularity and number in suburbs, public and private entities lost interest in funding urban areas. Carolyn Steel (2008) explains how "high

streets,” or urban streets with access to all basic amenities, began to disappear from the food landscape. Figure 8 illustrates this decline in food stores in the city of Syracuse over the latter half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

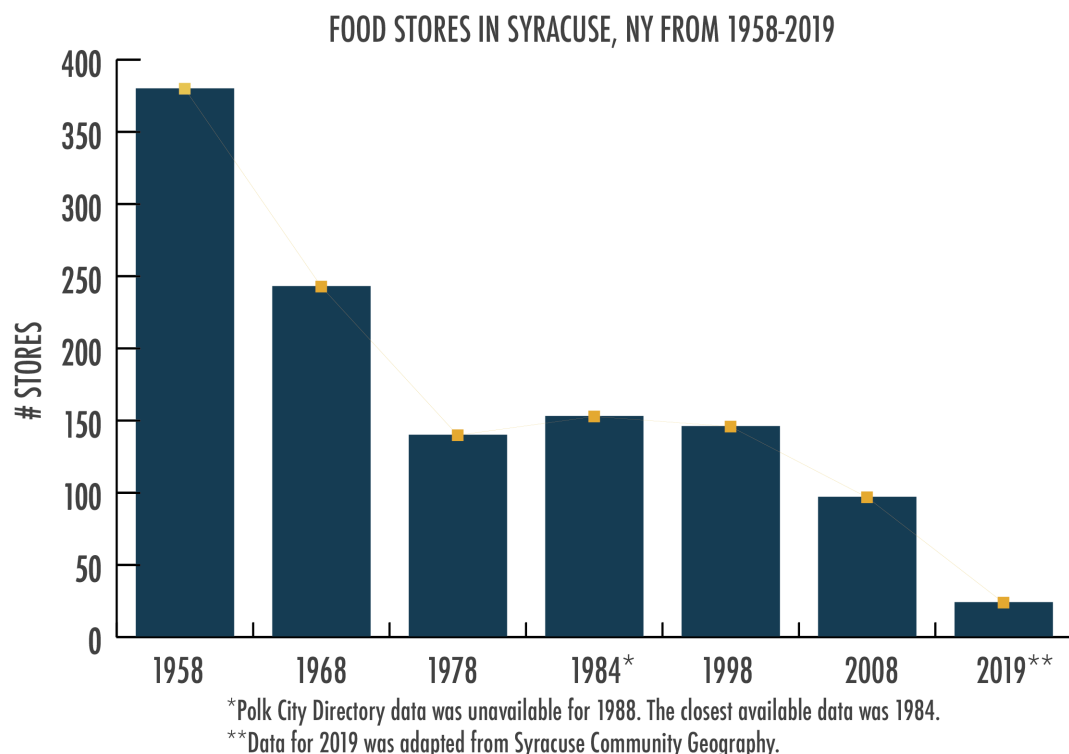


Figure 7. Decline in food stores located within the city from 1958 to 2019. For years 1958-2008, grocery stores were quantified from Polk City Directories for each year. 1984 was used instead of 1988 because no city directory was readily available. For 1958, grocery stores listed in the Polk City Directory did not account for all chain locations. From 1968 on, all chain locations were listed. The first appearance of retail stores such as Wal-Mart and Target occurred between 1998 and 2008. The number of current grocery stores were quantified from a dataset provided by Syracuse Community Geography.

### Rollback Prices, Rollback Neoliberalism

In the early 1980s, all of the factors that send people to soup kitchens and food pantries – unemployment, underemployment, excessive shelter costs, inadequate public assistance, and reduced food assistance – were suddenly intensified and made visible by a dramatic combination of escalating need and reduced social provision. On the one hand there was a recession, widely regarded as the worst since the great Depression, which threw hundreds of thousands of people out of work and made near ghost towns out of some of the nation’s once thriving industrial centers. Terms like “empty smoke stack,” “Rust Belt,” and “New Poor” entered our vocabulary. The poverty rate, which had hovered between 11 and 12 percent throughout the 1970s, rose steadily in the early 1980s, reaching a peak of 15.2 percent in 1983. On the other hand, the long, slow erosion of public assistance benefits that had characterized the seventies was suddenly overshadowed by a major assault on domestic social spending. Ronald Reagan sought and obtained

from Congress a series of reductions in programs for poor people: cuts in income supports, Medicaid, housing assistance, energy assistance, unemployment compensation, and food assistance were finalized in the Omnibus Budget Reconciliation Act of 1981, commonly referred to as OBRA. Additional cuts followed in the next budget (Poppendieck, 1998, p. 81-82).

After twenty years of encouraging white flight and repurposing once-deemed residential lands within cities, the United States entered a long period of deregulation. In the above quote, sociologist Janet Poppendieck explains how the beginning of the dismantling of the welfare state resulted in the increased role of charity in attempting to service poor people's basic needs (1998). The development of rollback and rollout neoliberalism (Peck and Tickell, 2002) during the Carter and Reagan administrations (Harvey, 2005, p. 23) meant that services once provided and managed by the state were "rolled back" or taken away, now placing the onus on nonprofit and charitable organizations to fill the gap through a "rolling out" of their services, however uneven. Deregulation was further amplified through the Clinton administration, when the 1996 Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act (PRWORA) put in place social welfare policy reforms that decreased welfare rolls by increasing restrictions on who could receive TANF rather than "moving people out of poverty."

In the late 1980s, amidst these circumstances, Charlie Nojaim's grandchild, Paul, took ownership of the Near Westside Nojaim's location. Paul would retain ownership until the store's closure in 2017.

In 1987, shortly following Nojaim's transition in ownership, the Federal Trade Commission (FTC) developed Standard Industry Codes (SIC) for all types of monetary trade. These codes would be used to classify specific types of products and to suggest wholesale pricing levels for suppliers to the specific trade classes. Overseen by the Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA), these restructured trade classes distinguished supermarkets from

independent and chain grocery stores by classifying them as department stores. Interesting to note, Wal-Mart entered food retail just a year later.

In 1997, following the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA), the Federal Trade Commission merged the United States industry codes with those of Canada and Mexico. The resulting North American Industry Code System (NAICS) was developed and overseen by the Bureau of Labor Statistics (BLS). Figures 9 and 10 show the differing trade class designations for independent and chain grocery stores, wholesalers, and supermarkets.

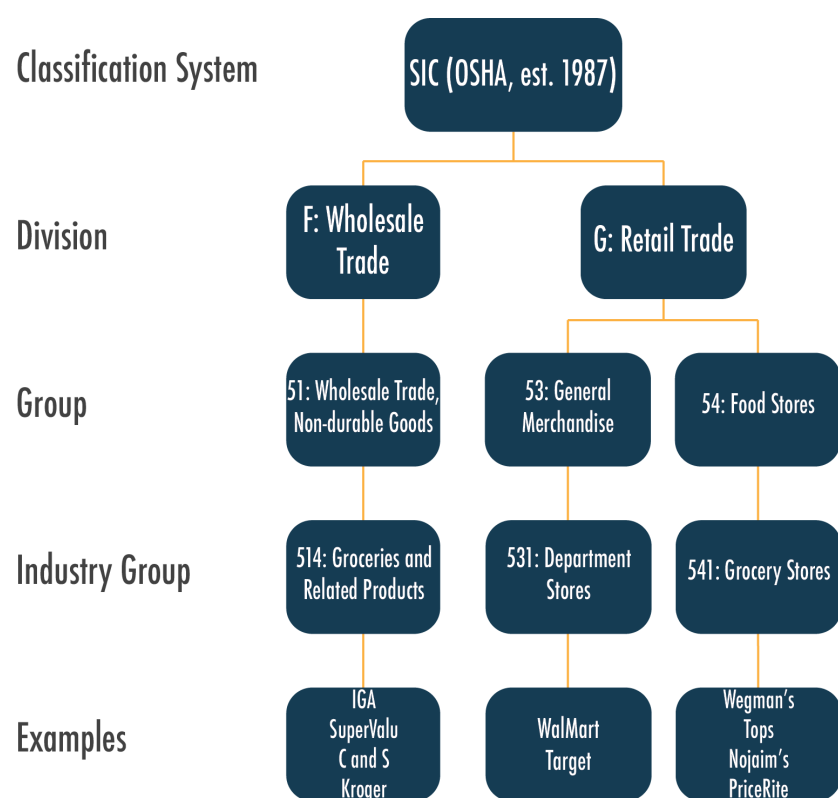


Figure 8. Trade Classes within Standard Industrial Classification, developed in 1987.

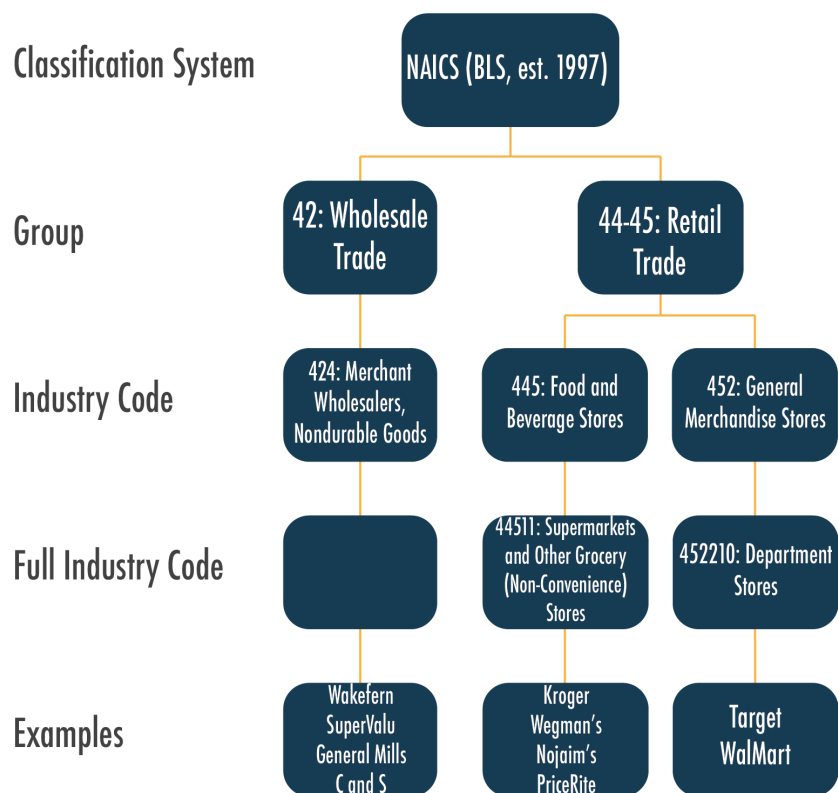


Figure 9. Trade Classes within North American Industry Classification System, developed in 1997.

When I sat down with Paul, he emphasized the effects of the trade class restructuring on Nojaim's profitability. By restructuring trade classes to distinguish supermarkets from independent and chain grocery stores, vendors were able to offer exclusive prices and exclusive goods to supermarkets. As Paul explained:

The ability for independent, right-size markets to exist disappeared with Federal Trade Commission policy... As it comes to food, a very important policy regarding class of trade came in. So, Walmart and some very big food companies, like Proctor and Gamble and others had argued that you can't look at class of trade with just one lens because everybody is different: convenience stores, supermarkets, and what have you. So, the policy currently is that you can price and package discriminate by category of what you're classified in.... [Vendors] can discriminate by volume, but [they] can't discriminate by saying, "Katie, I'm not gonna sell it to her. I'm going to favor Paul who's right across the street and all of his locations because I golf with him or we got some little side deal." So, that type of protection [ensures] that there's a fair playing field for the consumer and for the retailers to compete. But once you change the class of trade for an independent like us, we're screwed because we're like the bottom of the food chain.

Paul continued to explain how the change in class of trade affected his ability to competitively buy products to sell in stores:

In other words, go buy pickles at Sam's Club, [classified in] another category, and you got five-pound things of pickles, but you can't find them anywhere else. They're not even offering the product to you. They don't even have to offer fixed prices, they can say [specific goods] are only available for clubs... As long as they say Sam's, BJ's, Costco – that's that class of trade that [wholesalers] are going to offer it to. So, by doing that, the independent as a category was doomed.

Although Nojaim's had long before joined together with other independent grocery stores to form Olean, retail trade classifications allowed supermarkets an advantage in selling at low costs.

Again, Paul explains:

What [supermarkets] drove out of business is wholesale... Dewitt Wholesale? Long gone... P&C Wholesale, who sold to independents? Long gone... All of them are gone. So now how do you procure product? If you can't procure product, in the same playing field, you can't zig, you can't zag, you can't make your own decisions, you don't have a chance. That's the way I view it... Now what do we do? We left and joined a coop of wholesalers called Olean Wholesale Corporation... And what some smart independents did was realize we need to not be a partner with our wholesalers, we need to own our own distribution channel to try to make as best decisions as we can. And it was a great idea. But... it's just a bridge. Unless something changes systematically, that day will come [for Olean], too. Because they're facing the same issues.

Up until it was acquired by C&S Wholesale Grocers in late 2018, Olean serviced roughly 270 independent grocers and convenience stores across three states (Progressive Grocer, 2018).

Paul's reflection is illustrative of supermarkets' success in vertically consolidating and acquiring and owning each step of the supply chain. As supermarkets increasingly gained power over the distribution, pricing, and procurement of goods, independent grocers became increasingly vulnerable. Paul sees the economic transformations within grocery store operations as one of changing social values. "You have to have a system of distribution that is efficient and cost effective at the right price," Paul explained, "[f]or the [independent grocers] of the world, it's over. That system is eroded and corrupted by bigger interests and by folks that no longer value

the trade systems that this country was built on. And therefore [Nojaim's] was already on that end of it, a dying entity.” There was quite literally no way Nojaim's would ever gain even a fraction of the purchasing power that supermarkets have without being acquired by a larger operation. Paul continued to put up a good fight, serving the Near Westside to the best of his abilities. Several decades later, the low prices of chain grocery stores and supermarkets would outweigh customers' longtime loyalty to Nojaim's.

## **Conclusion**

Under capitalism, the general tendency towards consolidation and concentration has consistently favored the supermarket model. When the free market didn't perform as intended, capitalists went so far as to rewrite the rules and reclassify trade to benefit mass retail. While little to no regulations were put in place to control the rising power of supermarkets in the United States, other first-world, industrial countries took varying regulatory approaches and saw varying successes.<sup>11</sup> The rise in power and number of supermarkets since the 1950s had already weakened the economic stability of independent grocery stores. The change in Federal Trade Commission industry classifications marked the beginning of the end for Nojaim's. On top of this, in the years following, supermarkets would successfully manipulate federal government agendas around nationwide food insecurity and health concerns to benefit their business sector.

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<sup>11</sup> In France, for example, grocery stores in the early 1970s that were larger than 1,000 square meters and less than 10,000 square meters required local government approval and federal government approval, respectively (Steel, 2008). Italy's regulatory approach kept local, independent grocers afloat by requiring “special permits for shops larger than 1,500 square meters, favoring local shopkeepers who wanted to enlarge their stores over any proposals for new development” (Steel, 2008, p. 141). In 1980, West Germany, similar to Italy's approach, capped the amount of space retail stores could occupy in suburbs (Steel, 2008). Fast forwarding to the early 21st century, Germany's discouraging legislation for mass retailers has turned some of the largest players away. “In July 2006,” Susan Christopherson (2007) states, “Wal-Mart Corporation announced that it would sell its holdings in Germany and end its 8-year effort to become a dominant player in Germany's retail market” (p. 451). Britain, however, put little regulatory mechanisms in place until the late 1980s. PPG6, planning legislation, stated that local British governments must assess potential economic ramifications of supermarkets on local storeowners, but even these sorts of due diligence mechanisms failed at the local level. In 1996, PPG6 was revised, requiring “local authorities to adopt a ‘sequential approach when selecting sites for new superstores,’” with the ultimate goal of slowing the rise of supermarkets (Steel, 2008, p. 141).



#### IV. THE EMBEDDEDNESS OF NOJAIM'S

The former chapter served as a review of the American political economy from the 20<sup>th</sup> century to now in an effort to contextualize the rise of supermarkets and the demise of independent grocery stores. This background attempted to fulfill one aspect of my thesis: understanding what led to Nojaim's closure. Political economy would suggest that Nojaim's should've closed much earlier than it did, yet Nojaim's stayed afloat for several decades following changes in trade classifications that favored supermarkets. In this chapter, I aim to understand the uniqueness of Nojaim's as a small, independent grocery store that continued to exist amidst this nearly century-long, unfavorable political and economic climate.

Despite the context given in the previous chapter, my research findings immediately speak to the reasoning behind Nojaim's longstanding operations. Residents, nonprofit members, and elected officials largely spoke so highly of Nojaim's and Paul Nojaim that it led me to debates within the literature stemming from Karl Polanyi's theory of embeddedness. Polanyi describes embeddedness as the melding of economy into society, stating that social relations and institutions themselves created or developed their own economies and therefore embed their economies *within* them (Polanyi, 1944). However, Polanyi states that market economies are an exception because, theoretically, in a market economy, free trade and self-regulation should require no oversight or interaction with social relations or institutions (Polanyi, 1944; Gemici, 2007). Critiques around the contradictory nature of Polanyi's theoretical assumptions of embeddedness have been complemented by critiques that embeddedness is not inherently a clear-cut, formulaic characteristic of economy and society; Rather, embeddedness exists on a spectrum (Granovetter, 1985). A review of Mark Granovetter's contributions speaks to this further development:

Traditional economic interpretations of interactions between people assumes rational, self-interested behavior affected minimally by social relations. At the other extreme is “embeddedness,” the belief that actions between individuals is so predicated on social relations that evaluating behavior based on independent economic actors is grossly misleading... Both over and under-socialization have implicit assumptions of atomization that limit their effectiveness. One cannot model organizations as agents solely guided by their economic gain or social norms and structures. Instead individual action is embedded in dynamic systems of social relations (Rolag, 1985, p. 1).

Nojaim’s exhibits an exception to Polanyi’s rule that market economies are disembodied and falls in line with Granovetter’s argument for a more balanced understanding of how consumers make decisions, with both self-interest and social dynamics at play. I argue that Nojaim’s customers exhibited both aspects of embeddedness. One aspect, social relations, kept customers (and community partners) coming back for so long. The other aspect, economic, eventually outweighed the former and drew customers elsewhere, resulting in the closure of Nojaim’s.

In this chapter, I show how Nojaim’s adopted contemporary understandings of food access that resulted in an embedded grocery store as viewed by practitioners and policy makers. I first provide a broad overview of the concept of food deserts, the obesity epidemic, and the Healthy Food Financing Initiative (HFFI). Then, I show how the food desert narrative was developed and pushed by large corporations in an effort to enter poor neighborhoods, drive out existing competition, and then increase prices, which, in turn, increases profits. I then critically interrogate the food desert concept along with common perceptions of healthy eating and obesity. I connect back to the HFFI to show how such financing initiatives promote food desert logic and, in turn, corporate welfare, encouraging people to view supermarkets as solutions to food access.

As I explain each of these concepts and their critiques, I show how Near Westside practitioners partnered with Nojaim’s to promote an agenda around healthy eating. Additionally,

Nojaim's adopted many other practices outside the realm of healthy eating that aided in its embeddedness as viewed by practitioners, politicians, *and* customers. Loan programs, employment opportunities, diverse grocery selections, and delivery services were programs created by Paul Nojaim in an effort to cater directly to the demographics of his customer base in the Near Westside. Many saw Nojaim's to be an embedded operation, responsible for its longtime survival, but, ultimately, his customer base, when provided an opportunity to secure food at cheaper costs, chose economics (spending less on food) over preferences (shopping somewhere that felt like more than a grocery store).

### **Food Deserts, the Obesity Epidemic, and the Healthy Food Financing Initiative**

As a result of declining industries, deregulation, rollout neoliberalism, and the “end of welfare as we know it,” amongst many other factors, Syracuse's poverty rates were steadily increasing (Weiner, 2016). The turn of the century marked the rise of corporate welfare to ameliorate neighborhoods deemed “food deserts” and the acknowledgement of a nationwide obesity epidemic. Low-income, urban neighborhoods that lacked physical access to grocery stores as a result of redlining, white flight, urban renewal, and rollback neoliberalism, were now targets for corporate grocery stores and supermarkets.

The popular term, “food deserts,” was adopted by the United States Department of Agriculture (2000s) from researchers in the United Kingdom. Food deserts were first defined by the USDA as “low-income communities without ready access to healthy and affordable food” and were designated by a neighborhood's spatial distance from grocery stores coupled with the average income of residents of a given area (ANA, 2011; Ploeg et al., 2009). In most typical analyses, methodologies consist of identifying grocery stores within one mile in urban areas and 10 miles in rural areas (Ploeg et al., 2009). If grocery stores are outside of a specified distance of

resident's home, they are deemed to have food access disparities. Furthermore, when this data is linked with income levels below the poverty line, the resident is then characterized as living in a food desert.

The rise of this terminology is exemplary of the “grocery gaps” (Gottlieb and Joshi, 2010) that resulted from disinvestment and urban renewal. In 1998, there were roughly 234 less food stores within city limits than there were in 1958 (Table 3). Over time, urban, low-income neighborhoods were left with few and/or inadequate resources to meet their basic needs in terms of both food and social welfare benefits. As a result of political and economic systems throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the Near Westside and Syracuse as a whole began making news for its high concentrated poverty rates and drug epidemics (Jargowsky, 2015; Featherstone, 2015).

In conjunction with the nationwide acknowledgement of underserved neighborhoods was growing concern around obesity. In 2010, two years into Barack Obama's first-term as president, First Lady Michelle Obama began her *Let's Move!* public health campaign to end childhood obesity. The campaign, deeply intertwined with food deserts, addressed the popularized American public concern with the “obesity epidemic,” referred to by scholars as the obesogenic environment thesis, which posits that the built environment and lack of quality food within one's immediate surrounding are the main causes of obesity (Guthman, 2011). Psyche Williams-Forson's (2006) historical study of stereotypes that affiliate Black people with chicken revealed the problematic assumption that poor people, poor Black people in particular, have a lack of knowledge about how to eat well. Food studies scholar Julie Guthman (2011) summarized the ways in which Americans see fatness:

Fat people have long been subject to a great variety of pejorative characterizations. Contemporary ideas about fatness are different, however – often cloaked in the language of health... These ways of seeing obesity have taken hold through the

proliferation of ideas about personal responsibility, health care, and citizenship that are endemic to neoliberalism (p. 47).

Contemporary, progressive obesity-related interventions are based around the obesogenic environment thesis that states that the cause of obesity is the proximity of people to nutritionally void foods, lack of built environment aspects such as parks, and reliance on vehicles. Because of political and economic processes such as urban renewal and disinvestment, the most-often targeted areas are urban, low-income neighborhoods such as the Near Westside, which lack access to most of the basic resources that public health practitioners and scholars consider necessary/important to keep obesity at bay. State-funded solutions engage planning entities and non-profits to create bike paths, farmers markets, and urban parks, and to increase walkability within low-income neighborhoods (Guthman, 2013).

Given Michelle Obama's campaign details, she suggested that food deserts, or the lack of grocery stores in one's immediate environment, were another aspect of the built environment that encouraged obesity. Thus, Obama created several grant funding streams to increase food access through urban and rural areas through grocery store development, to increase healthy options in both grocery stores and corner stores, and to increase other healthy food retailing programs.

The 2010 Healthy Food Financing Initiative (HFFI) is a multi-level government effort, appointing each of the Treasury Department, USDA, and the Office of Health and Human Services (HHS) to administer different aspects of the grant program. Collaboration between public and private sectors is encouraged through the initiative to "integrate community economic development strategies, such as community engagement, cross-sectoral collaboration and interdisciplinary assessment, into the design and implementation" of "food retail development policies and programs" (Infahsaeng, 2014, p. ii). From a 2010 Treasury Department press release, HHS was expected to allocate \$400 million to fund community development

corporations, not-for-profits, and businesses that ‘support projects ranging from the construction or expansion of a grocery store to smaller-scale interventions such as placing refrigerated units stocked with fresh produce in convenience stores’ (United States Treasury Department, 2010). According to an October 2017 HFFI report, \$220 million in government-backed funds and an estimated \$1 billion in private funds have been directed towards increasing both food access and employment in both urban and rural impoverished areas (Healthy Food Access Portal, 2017) \$125 million was allocated to the HFFI in the 2014 Farm Bill (HHS, 2017).<sup>12</sup>

One byproduct of the *Let’s Move!* Campaign was the Partnership for a Healthier America, created in 2011 to further address childhood obesity efforts through research-backed public health strategies (Ken, 2014). Today, many postindustrial cities have partnered with chain grocery stores and supermarkets in attempts to address food accessibility in low-income neighborhoods. However, these strategies are developed without examining or addressing the historical systemic and structural causes of food inaccessibility. The formulation of the “food desert” narrative is used by large corporations to secure public funding, open new locations in low-income neighborhoods, drive out existing small-scale businesses, and, ultimately, to gain further market control. By first revealing the problematic assumptions that undergird both the concept of the food desert and the obesogenic environment thesis, we can better understand how corporate welfare is presented as the best solution.

***Problematic Assumption 1: Food access is determined by physical access.***

Geographers have heavily critiqued the food desert concept. First, the parameters used to identify food deserts are based solely on geographic characteristics and neglect to acknowledge several other factors of food access. Spatial assessments provide what appears to be a clear-cut

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<sup>12</sup> There was no direct reference to the HFFI in the 2018 Farm Bill. It appears as though the HFFI is now a permanent part of The Reinvestment Fund.

approach to identifying areas with urban food access disparities. “Spatial analyses of food deserts,” Jerry Shannon (2016) explains, “identify areas that combine poor geographic access to healthy foods with high levels of social deprivation” (p. 187).

However, scholars have long argued that much more goes into determining food access. Michael Widener and Jerry Shannon (2014) argue that the emphasis of spatial relationships ignores the temporality of the food system and the mobility of modern-day people. Food accessibility is inherently tied not only to place but also to life changes over the course of a week, month, or year. Longitudinal, comprehensive analyses of food systems in urban, low-income neighborhoods would provide a more in-depth understanding of different factors affecting food access. Research regarding Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) and Women, Infants, and Children Program (WIC) benefit usage over the course of the month and the reliance on emergency food programs towards the end of the month is overlooked. Hours and changes in location for grocery stores and alternative food sources may also hinder accessibility (Widener and Shannon, 2014). Individuals who live in low-income neighborhoods are not as permanently tied to one neighborhood, contradicting popular stereotypes that poor people reside in specific, set areas (Dubowitz et al., 2015; Widener and Shannon, 2014). Methods of public transportation present additional barriers as well as require time and understanding of how to navigate subway or bus routes. The use of the home as the end destination after getting groceries makes an assumption for a highly varying group of people (Widener and Shannon, 2014).

In short, the food desert metaphor overlooks the complexity of factors shaping food access and fails to understand the lives of the poor beyond problematic stereotypes. As Widener (2018) suggests, scholars and practitioners need to move past the concept of the food desert and

analyze access to food through a “holistic accessibility framework” (p. 258) by concluding that, “the capabilities, and evidence that the usefulness of the food desert concept is questionable, should lead us to the retirement of the term, as well as to a new focus on more nuanced forms of understanding how the geography of food retail and people contribute to dietary outcomes” (p. 259).

Building grocery stores where a neighborhood deems them necessary is not inherently bad – approaches that only temporarily solve physical food access *are* important. My research seeks to appreciate the necessity of such short-term fixes in a neoliberalized food system while critiquing the narrowminded focus on building grocery stores as a panacea. In doing so, my research both confronts the food desert narrative and strengthens the critiques thereof by employing a mixed-methods, comprehensive approach to understanding issues of food access. Once Nojaim’s closed, some Near Westside residents’ access to food was without a question physically hindered, yet my research illuminates how the Near Westside, even with Nojaim’s in operation, experienced an extreme lack of food access.

Current arenas of activism around food and agriculture already reflects a delimited politics of the possible. That many of these projects emphasize consumer choice, localism, entrepreneurialism, and self-improvement demonstrates the extent to which food politics have been at the cutting edge of neoliberal regulatory transformations (Guthman, 2008, p. 437).

Third, the definition of both food deserts and obesity suggest prefabricated, uniform solutions. Rather than carefully considering the structural causes of food inaccessibility or unique neighborhood characteristics, the solution to any food desert is to increase the physical presence of food through the implementation of a grocery store. Studies assessing the implementation of grocery stores in neighborhoods that qualify as food deserts have found no significant connection to diet and food security (Sadler et al., 2015).



Similarly, obesity comes with its own questionable assumptions. Many practices in health and nutrition are socially and culturally constructed but are treated as universal in nature. Scholar Charlotte Biltekoff's historical analysis of dietary guidelines suggest that many nutrition guidelines came from a very subjective process (2013). Founder of home economics, Ellen Richards, and the "father of nutrition," William Atwater, are two of many dietary pioneers who used their own classist, racist, and gendered viewpoints to influence understandings of obesity, nutrition, and what constitutes "eating right" (Biltekoff, 2013). People's trust in science as fact, and inherited misunderstandings of nutrition, have narrowed further the approaches to solving the obesity epidemic. Many scholars have employed the energy-balance model affiliated with obesity only to find it shows little change in calorie intake over time and across class, race, and gender (Guthman, 2013). A study exploring connections between females' body mass index (BMI), the built environment, and the food environment found no statistically significant relationship between BMI and the built environment but did find that proximity of women's homes to restaurants was associated with a higher BMI (Raja et al., 2010). Scholars have suggested alternative explanations to obesity, including long-term exposure to stress, past nutritional deprivation, and exposure to specific chemicals such as PCBs and DDT (Guthman, 2013). Although these findings are preliminary and can be misconstrued as the result of one's ancestors making poor choices, they elucidate the gaps in knowledge around obesity. Guthman argues that, through problem closure, these prefabricated solutions are more easily accepted by politicians because they are more palatable and do not try to tackle more structural inequalities in the food system, such as the inability for certain classes, races, or genders to access basic resources due to absence of government regulations and protections (2013).

***Problematic Assumption 2: Poor people do not know how to eat healthy.***

Second, the obesogenic environment thesis shifts the healthy eating onus onto the individual. Flint et al. (2012) is exemplary of this mindset: they found that perceptions of health may increase within the community; but, despite critiques of the nation's large focus on obesity, studies have not found a statistically significant relationship between the development of grocery stores and fruit and vegetable consumption or BMI. Here, Flint et al.'s emphasis on BMI and fruits and vegetables over food security assumes that the original hypothesis was rooted in an attempt to get poor people to "healthier" choices. Educational pamphlets and signage within grocery stores or enacting a nutritional labeling system for each individual product are representative of "nudges" (Sunstein and Thaler, 2008) associated with neoliberal paternalism. Neoliberal paternalism underlies public health interventions consisting of policies that "help" low-income consumers "make the correct choice." The "nudge" in the "right" direction distinguishes citizens once again as consumers for their ability to choose, rather than be guaranteed healthful and culturally appropriate foods by the state (Shannon, 2014; Soss et al., 2011). Connecting back to food deserts and the obesogenic environment thesis, it is often poor people who become the targets of these interventions for their assumed poor dietary habits. Such quick fixes are, in many cases, necessary and should not be dismissed. However, these temporary "solutions" exist within a neoliberalized food system that overshadows historical and structural causes of poverty, often leaving the fixing of the food system up to people who lack consistent and adequate funds and cannot enact change on a broader level (i.e. government).

Through neoliberalism, grocery stores, both independent and chain, became perfect sites for the state to shift responsibility and reproduce structural inequalities in a variety of ways. The creation of opportunities to engage in physical activity as well as increase physical access to

healthy foods reinforces neoliberal paternalism, giving consumers the tools to make the “right choice,” while still placing the emphasis on the individual (Shannon, 2014).

In Syracuse, the Lerner Center for Public Health Promotion and a doctor’s office worked extensively with Nojaim’s to promote physical activity and healthy eating in the Near Westside neighborhood in a variety of ways (Figure 11).



2014: Nojaim’s underwent a renovation that resulted in placing fresh fruits and vegetables at the front of the store with clearer signage.



2014: The Lerner Center for Public Health Promotion implemented the Monday Mile in the Near Westside to encourage physical activity in the neighborhood.



2016: Nojaim’s partnered with St. Joe’s to create an educational program for Near Westside residents with diabetes. Residents with diabetes received a coupon for fresh fruits and vegetables redeemable at Nojaim’s for every class they attended.



2016: Nojaim’s partnered with the Lerner Center for Public Health Promotion to promote the “Trade Up for Better Health” initiative that encourages Nojaim’s customers to make healthy choices based on a simplified nutrition labeling system.

*Figure 10. Practitioner Efforts in the Near Westside.*

In the final years of Nojaim’s, Paul pushed for educational approaches to encourage his customer base to eat healthier. When I asked if it was appropriate to try to teach people who receive entitlements, such as SNAP or WIC, how to eat healthy, Paul responded with opinions reflecting neoliberal paternalism.

Shouldn’t people be encouraged when they’re getting a program like [SNAP] to participate in some type of an old-fashioned home economics course? ... If [they’re] on food stamps, they still get the flexibility in making their own decisions,

but do you know how many people buy product based on \$5 of that [product] instead of how much it is per pound? Because they aren't able to touch and see the coordination of that. You know that our store was one of the lowest redemption models for coupons – manufacturer's coupons? ... Can we create out of this massive amount of money in the federal government Farm Bill as part of those food pantries, programs that teach people how to maximize the value of the quality [of food]? And it can be done right through the food pantry.

Paul's response hints at the idea that poor people do not know how to spend their money properly. Thus, Paul believes, along with many public health practitioners, nutritionists, and everyday people, that if "we" give poor people something for free, "we" should be able to have a say in how that money is spent. Home economics courses and nutritional guidelines arose as a means for the middle class to maintain control and distinction from working class people. Poor people have long been taught what items are appropriate for them to purchase based on the quantity and price points at which they are offered, rather than dietary preferences or needs (Biltekoff, 2013). Here, Paul is suggesting that poor people need help in making decisions that would, as he feels, be more economical and result in poor people having more money left over to "get out of poverty."

In 2016, Paul developed a partnership with the Lerner Center for Public Health Promotion and St. Joseph's Primary Care Center West (St. Joe's) across the parking lot to develop an educational program for Near Westside residents that had been diagnosed with diabetes. For each "Diabetes Self-Management" session that Near Westside residents went to, they would receive "prescriptions" for fruits and vegetables that could be redeemed at Nojaim's. These "prescriptions" functioned as coupons that allowed residents with diabetes to extend their dollar, but only in a way that was deemed healthy.

In the same year, Paul worked extensively with the Lerner Center for Public Health Promotion to develop the "Trade Up for Better Health" healthy shopper rewards program. In this

program, all grocery store items would be marked with a simplified version of the nutrition facts label you could find on the back of a can or box (Figure 12). This simplified system, called NuVal, ranked food items on a scale of 1-100, where, for instance, broccoli would rank as a 100 and Cheez-It's would rank much lower (Figure 13). Nojaim's customers who signed up for the healthy shopper rewards program would receive points based on the NuVal score for the items they bought. The "rewards" came in the form of gym memberships, free doctor's appointments, and bicycles. Eventually, Paul and the Lerner Center for Public Health Promotion hoped to partner with St. Joe's to electronically record people's purchasing habits and match these against their medical conditions. While this part of the initiative would never come to fruition due to technical difficulties with NuVal, the efforts of all of the partners involved are clear examples of neoliberal paternalism and the stereotypical beliefs that poor people do not know how to make "good" choices.

Nojaim's "Trade Up for Better Health" exemplifies "nudging" in action. By providing some information to customers rather than forcing them to consume a specific way, Nojaim's customers are steered in an ideal direction yet remain free to make their own choice. As Nojaim's, the Lerner Center for Public Health Promotion, and NuVal would market, customers were "trading up" for better choices and for better health (Figure 14). It is these programs that contributed to Nojaim's embeddedness as perceived by partners such as the Lerner Center for Public Health Promotion, the Near Westside Initiative, and St. Joe's.



Figure 11. Nojaim's products with NuVal scores (Lerner Center, 2016).



Figure 12. Signage for NuVal and Nojaim's "Trade Up for Better Health" healthy shopper rewards program (Lerner Center, 2016).





Figure 13. A child poses with marketing materials from Nojaim's "Trade Up for Better Health" healthy shopper rewards program (Lerner Center, 2016).

Increasing the availability of healthier foods in grocery stores, urban agriculture, creating access to alternative markets such as mobile markets and farmers markets, and developing community gardens as a source of food are a few of many approaches that are representative of the tactics organizations and scholars are currently employing in an effort to increase overall public health. The middle-class has assumed the role of trying to address issues of food access in urban areas, yet their efforts are often misguided and remain comfortably within the neoliberal realm of thought (Allen, 2008; Guthman, 2008; Alkon, 2014). Grocery store-centered efforts include non-profit organizations attempting to stock grocery stores with more fruits and vegetables and innovating ways to increase the value of SNAP for healthier foods. These approaches likewise neglect the underlying issue, poverty, that causes such concerns.

Outside of Syracuse, similar projects exist. For example, the Healthy Bodega Initiative in Brooklyn and the Philadelphia Healthy Corner Store Initiative create partnerships between health departments and corner stores to increase the amount of fruits and vegetables available while remaining profitable. The focus on corner stores and bodegas is an attempt to increase food access outside of typical grocery store hours of operation and to use existing food retail infrastructure and neighborhood-scale interventions (Bloomberg et al., 2010; The Food Trust, 2014). These approaches are first grounded in the obesogenic environment thesis for they directly increase physical access to “healthy” food. Often, this increase in physical access is accompanied by signage or educational materials encouraging “healthy” choices, rooted in neoliberal paternalistic thought (The Food Trust, 2014).

### **Corporate “Solutions”**

Given Problematic Assumptions 1 and 2, corporations have a large advantage in tackling the problems affiliated with food deserts and the obesity epidemic. The carefully crafted discourse suggests that opening up stores in low-income, urban areas is the clear-cut solution. Together, the food desert narrative and obesity epidemic promote neoliberalism by encouraging less government intervention through the means of increasing public-private partnerships and grant opportunities for nonprofits.

Supermarkets and grocery stores have received the vast majority of attention from the HFFI kickstarted by Michelle Obama. The USDA, Health & Human Services (HHS), and United States Department of Treasury (Treasury) developed HFFI grants eligible to Community Development Corporations (CDCs) and Community Development Financial Institutions (CDFIs) and provided public and private investment in areas meeting the food desert criteria. Many scholars still argue for support of the HFFI and its offshoots: The Food Trust’s Pennsylvania



Fresh Food Financing Initiative and New York State's Healthy Food and Healthy Communities Fund (Chrisinger, 2014; Raja et al., 2010). Literature on financing initiatives in grocery stores is limited, but the few studies that do exist suggest further analysis and assessment of the initiatives is necessary. A study by Sadler et al. (2015) of the introduction of grocery stores in food deserts found that, while physical access improved, there was no statistically significant change in the cost of groceries. My research illuminates the ways that harmful discourse promoted by corporations around food access has become so pervasive and normalized that, even without funding from government-backed financing initiatives, chain grocery stores and supermarkets are still successful in obtaining public funding to operate in underserved neighborhoods.

### **Meeting Residents Where They Are**

Studies of local food systems, for example, juxtapose the nature of direct marketing agriculture and community supported agriculture (CSAs) with that of conventional grocery stores. "Measured against conventional grocery markets or superstores," Clare Hinrichs (2000) argues, "farmers' markets are settings for exchanges embedded in social ties, based on proximity, familiarity and mutual appreciation" (p. 298). I argue that the economic environment within Nojaim's, which operated within the conventional food system, was also predicated on social ties, proximity, familiarity, and mutual appreciation.

Nojaim's was known for its wide selection of Hispanic and Latino foods, catering to the demographics of the Near Westside neighborhood. Virginia, a longtime Near Westside resident, spoke to Paul and his family's conscious effort to understand the food preferences of the immediate neighborhood.

One of the things that [the Nojaim family] started to do many, many years ago was to bring in food for our Latino population and that was very popular. There were things you can find there that you couldn't get at other stores and since then, a lot of the other stores have caught up to, you know, the Latino preferences and Asian

preferences. [But] for many years, that was the major store for people to shop – the Goya products, the vegetables and things that they like that they couldn't find other places. So that was definitely a strength. They had excellent selections of meat. So, there were people that were shopping there just for the meat there. So that was definitely a strength.

Other Nojaim's customers also praised the grocery selection. Nearly 40% (N=51) of survey respondents shopped at Nojaim's because of grocery selection (Figure 15).

#### WHY CUSTOMERS SHOPPED AT NOJAIM'S

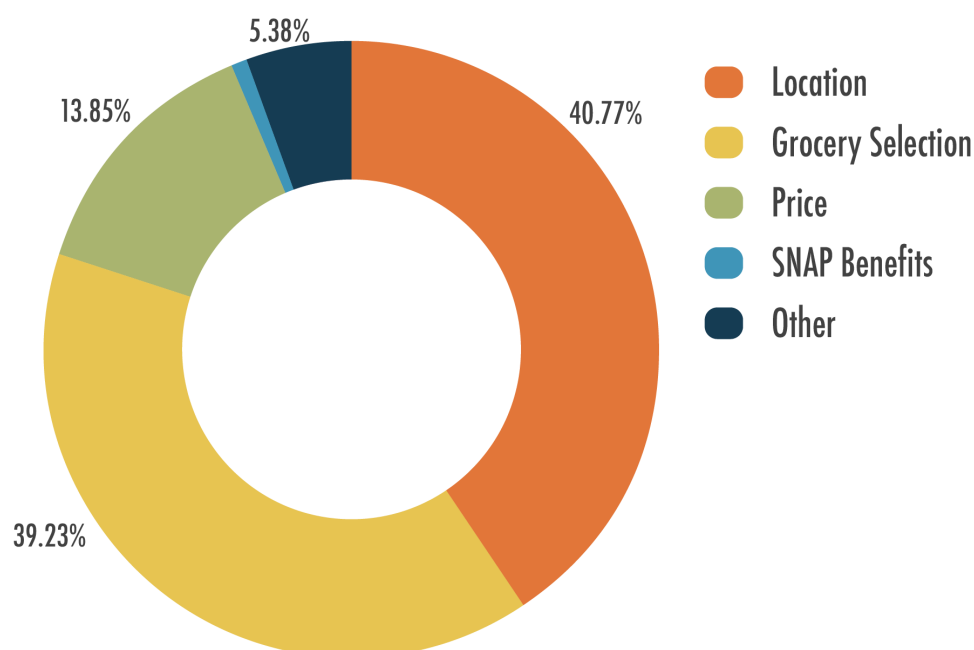


Figure 14. Why Customers Shopped at Nojaim's.

One customer reflected on the then upcoming loss of the store and how it would affect the Hispanic and Latino community.

It's just a sad thing. It's a sad moment in our community... [Nojaim's was] one of the first to cater to the Hispanic and Latino population. My understanding is that their meat department is really great – the store focuses on quality, not quantity. They focus on giving back to the community and it's so sad to see them close their doors.

Patrice, a director of an emergency-food related charitable organization, spoke to Paul Nojaim's familiarity with the Near Westside neighborhood.

I think that [Paul] certainly met people where they were at. You know, what products, availability, access, that they were in an area which no one else really is besides the convenience store across the street which I wouldn't call a grocery store. They were longstanding. I think people felt safe... I think it's a loss on a couple of levels. Obviously, the first and foremost is the access point for people as a grocery store. But [also] his firm understanding of the community and certain items for community members.

Paul's awareness of the neighborhood extended beyond cultural preferences to the lack of economic development. Economic conditions so many of the residents were facing led him to develop a workforce development program to provide jobs to the direct neighborhood.<sup>13</sup> Robin, a former director of a public health organization, explains the thoughtfulness of Paul's approach to providing jobs to neighborhood residents.

The [Nojaim] family made it their mission to ensure that they were not just a grocery store but that they were an economic driver for families in that neighborhood. The number of people they employed, the kids of the employees that came to work there, starting a workforce development program, starting a butcher program... They were one of the only remaining grocery stores that would cut meat to order. And so, they did a workforce development program where they trained butchers to cut to order, which is very unique now. And so that was how they chose to run their business. I always describe Paul more as a social entrepreneur that really, the community came first for him and that it was also a place where if somebody needed help with their son or daughter who was having a substance abuse issue, that store was almost the first place people would go to get help because Paul was – is – so connected into that neighborhood and their values system for a private company, I hate to say it, is very unique... While the food has been lost, the heart of that neighborhood has almost been lost in a way, too. And that is not easily, if ever, replaceable.

In addition to the butcher apprenticeship program, Paul made an effort to hire locally and, as Ted phrased it, he “took chances” on the community.

The impact that [Nojaim's] had on food access is huge in that neighborhood, but it was also so much more than a grocery store, right? You can just tell that when you hang out with Paul for two and a half hours. Like, this guy is not the typical manager of a grocery store. It is a family owned business of 100 years... He was employing dozens of people from the neighborhood. So many people in that community could point to like, “My first job was at Nojaim's.” And, like, he took chances on people,

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<sup>13</sup> Nojaim's received a \$500 credit per youth employed, capped at \$4,000, through the 2012 New York Youth Works program (Delaney, 2012).

you know, with records, with challenges, issues – he always gave people chances. So I think that also made him that much more of a community institution. And so I think that’s why it was so painful when the grocery store [closed]. Because had it been like a whatever, a Top’s – like yeah, this sucks, but what did Top’s ever give to this community?

Knowing that he would not be able to create jobs for the entire neighborhood, Paul did his best to cater to residents’ shopping needs. As many interviewees and survey respondents explained, Paul knew the needs of his customer base. For many customers, physically accessing food was one of their biggest problems. Senior citizens living in public housing directly across the street from Nojaim’s often had physical disabilities that impeded their ability to get to the store. In 2013, to counteract these challenges, Paul worked to develop a grocery home delivery program – Rosie – similar to Instacart and other nationally recognized grocery delivery services (Tampone, 2013). The mobile ordering platform allowed customers to avoid the physical acts of walking through aisles, pushing a grocery cart, or carrying items home. One of the major barriers to Rosie, however, was the limited forms of payment the mobile platform accepted. At the time, customers who received WIC or SNAP could not use their allotted benefits when shopping through Rosie.

Rosie is a home delivery service for groceries that Paul was actually partnered with. They came from Cornell and they’ve been at it for 7 or 8 years and they’re all over the country now. But when Paul was piloting that [program] with them... a lot of his deliveries were going across the street to people who were homebound and if they could’ve used their [SNAP] EBT card – there was just so much potential for how that would impact the rest of the neighborhood, but as it is right now there’s not permission to do it that way.

When possible, Paul did his best to cater to people who received entitlements. Ted, the former nonprofit director, explained how Paul’s signage in the store helped people distinguish WIC accepted items.

He helped WIC customers so much compared to the average grocery store – making it so clear. “This is a WIC item, this is not.” And the patience – I was kind of

ignorant to all of this stuff – I know somebody who shops [at a different grocery store] and she’s like, “It happens all of the time that somebody will show up with a WIC item or what they think is a WIC item and the people there will be like, ‘Sorry, you know, that juice, even though it seems like it should be a WIC-approved juice, it’s not a WIC-approved juice and now we have to undo your entire order and go back out of the line.’” [WIC] just became that nightmare and everybody behind [the WIC customer] is getting upset and frustrated and the cashiers would start to really stigmatize WIC customers, [saying] like, “Oh, here comes another one of these folks!” ... Versus at Paul’s store, it’s like for one, negate the confusion and then two, treat people with dignity. So, you just didn’t have that there the way you experienced in other stores.

Eliminating confusion created a more positive atmosphere and shopping experience for often stigmatized customers, crafting a selection of foods that customers preferred, creating local jobs when possible, and extending services to customers who had disabilities and/or entitlements are a few of the many ways Nojaim created an embedded grocery store. “I’m just very sad. My heart is broken. I don’t know if people realize the memories we have here,” one customer stated. Paul’s efforts to move beyond simply selling groceries out of a storefront to developing a deep understanding of the Near Westside created a grocery store that operated more like a community center and less like a business. As interviewees and survey respondents reflected on the loss of Nojaim’s, people commended Paul for his genuine dedication to the neighborhood.

He was really, and still is – I shouldn’t say it in the past tense, still is really committed to and interested in that neighborhood and personally engaged with people in that neighborhood in a way that I think very few people do... He really worked to make the store a [community] hub, you know.

Paul Nojaim does a lot for the community. He’s always been for the community. I don’t know how he does it. You’ll never get used to the store closing. You won’t be able to get it out of your head for at least ten years. We’ll never recover.

This just doesn’t make any sense. This doesn’t make a lick of sense that they would close this 98-year old store down. It is monumental and more beneficial than anyone could imagine.

### *The Fall of Nojaim's*

We have been attempting to tell people that the economics and the market viability would make it very difficult for a full-scale grocery store to ever come back into the space and that's part of the reason why the store was not sustainable given the competitors they market. As an independent grocer, you don't have as many options – you have no options – if you've got one store, that's what your spreading your loss over. If you have a chain, you can spread that loss over multiple stores. So we have tried as best we can to say to say, "Perhaps in the future, there's an opportunity for a right-sized grocery store" ... But we have found through our work with residents that even if they don't have a car, they will find a way to get to the grocery store... People will go to multiple stores to do their shopping. So Nojaim's less and less was becoming the store to do the predominant shopping, so if you're going to feed your family for a week, you're not going to buy all of it at Nojaim's... How people are buying food is shifting dramatically and if you have a limited budget and you have the ability to travel, you're going to go to the place where you can find the best deal... As much as everyone says that they miss the store, the sales and the volume were just not there to support a 27,000 square food grocery store any longer.

Robin explained that Nojaim's existence as grocery store was limited due to the broader political economy. Indeed, Nojaim's held on by a thread for quite some time, which can be attributed to Paul's embeddedness in the neighborhood. In a sense, "brand loyalty" was built over nearly one hundred years in business. Like Granovetter (1985), my research shows that, for Nojaim's, economic rationale and social preference were at play. While the case of Nojaim's may illustrate this claim, it also shows how economic rationale can, given changing circumstances, eclipse any sort of community or social preference. As Ted stated, "In that neighborhood, there's a huge food access need, not from a – 'it is impossible for us to find it' but from a 'it is impossible for us to afford it.'"

The "nail in the coffin" of Nojaim's is important, too, but the changing food landscape that Nojaim's persisted through and the constant reliance on public-private partnerships and grants reveals the broader political and economic context that contributed to the eventual fall of Nojaim's. The Nojaim family was able to adopt characteristics of mass retail, as shown in

Chapter 3, and emphasize the embeddedness of their own operation, but, ultimately, capitalism won.

## V. THE PRICE IS RIGHT, BUT FOR WHOM?

“There has to be a better way than to pick winners and losers.”

– Former member of a nonprofit organization

On the first Sunday in April 2017, residents of Syracuse’s Southside neighborhood were joined by elected officials and corporate employees of PriceRite Marketplace (herein PriceRite) to celebrate the landmark opening of a supermarket in the Southside neighborhood of Syracuse, the first in 47 years. Southside residents expressed great joy and appreciation for the opening of a grocery store in their neighborhood after years of going without one. “Fresh fish, you know, flowers, fresh fruits and vegetables – it’s what the community has needed for a long, long time and I’m very, very happy and I think we’re all blessed that it’s here,” said Southside resident Charlotte Vallejo (Trimble, 2017).

The Southside is adjacent to the Near Westside neighborhood, also home to high concentrations of poverty among African American (38.95% poverty) and Latino residents (84.65% poverty).<sup>14</sup> During a walking tour of the Southside, a neighborhood activist recalled the long history of a lack of investment in the neighborhood. Walking down one of the main corridors in the Southside, South Avenue, it was clear that there were no immediate stores that could provide residents with access to basic needs. Southside residents face similar challenges to Near Westside residents in accessing basic resources, housing, and adequate employment. For many, these challenges further complicate people’s ability to buy groceries. The neighborhood used to have Loblaws, a full-service discount grocery store, until it closed in 1970, fleeing the city alongside many other businesses (Kirst, 2009). “The new giants of trade preferred suburban sites,” Syracuse news columnist Sean Kirst notes, reflecting on the impacts of urban flight and

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<sup>14</sup> “Southside” refers to data from Census Tract 52. All data were obtained from the U.S. Census Bureau American Community Survey 5-year estimates, 2013-17.



disinvestment in inner city neighborhoods (2009). Up until recently, the Loblaws building (now home to PriceRite) and many adjacent buildings sat vacant.

In this chapter, I argue that people living and working in the immediate neighborhood used their framing of food access disparities to garner public support for the development of a grocery store. In doing so, activists, rather than owners of grocery stores or supermarkets, used food desert discourse to successfully secure a chain grocery store in the Southside neighborhood. As explained in Chapter 4, the food desert narrative promotes corporate welfare as a solution. My research shows how this solution has become so pervasive that it is now Syracuse residents' dominant way of understanding disparities in food access. In addition, I suggest that public officials did not adequately assess the needs or solutions to such food access concerns in the Southside neighborhood. Public officials were quick to respond to the desires of neighborhood activists and residents rather than assessing the direct, systemic needs of the Southside neighborhood as well as the unintended outcomes of subsidizing a chain grocery store in the neighborhood.

### ***The Price is Right: Securing a Grocery Store in a Poor Neighborhood***

In 2009, community activists from the Southside began to rally support for a neighborhood grocery store. The activists spent almost a decade trying to get a grocery store back into the Southside neighborhood, led by Jubilee Homes, Inc. (herein Jubilee Homes), a nonprofit that promotes neighborhood economic development through housing development, workforce training, and youth programming, including an urban farm and market. After buying the then-vacant Loblaws building, Jubilee Homes spent three years trying to find a grocery store that was “willing to come into their ‘inner-city’ neighborhood” (Moriarty, 2017). The nonprofit originally wanted a locally supported, independent grocery store, planning “to create a

corporation that would return the structure to its original use as a grocery, thus keeping jobs and money in the area” (Kirst, 2009). However, with little support from local government and lack of cooperation with other local businesses, Southside residents looked elsewhere. By 2010, Jubilee Homes had collected over 3,000 signatures of Southside residents pledging to support a grocery store in their neighborhood (Griffin-Nolan, 2016). The immense support from Southside residents, voiced at public meetings at the neighborhood community center and documented through signatures, made clear that neighborhood residents were all in agreement: a central grocery store was desperately needed.

In 2012, PriceRite opened its first location in Syracuse, roughly three and a half miles from the Southside on one of the city’s highly traveled commercial corridors. PriceRite is a grocery store known for its discounted prices, limited but ethnically diverse selection, and “no frills” shopping experience. At the same time the first location was opening, PriceRite president Neil Duffy and Jubilee Homes began having conversations about opening a PriceRite in the Southside (Moriarty, 2017). With the neighborhood grocery store campaign growing in its support, gaining roughly 1,000 additional signatures from Southside residents committing to become shoppers at a potential neighborhood PriceRite, Jubilee Homes was eager to converse with Duffy (Nolan, 2012). After seeking support for years from a number of different avenues with no success, Jubilee Homes and the Southside finally found someone willing to take a chance on them: A chain grocery store whose parent company, Wakefern, Inc. (Wakefern) reported revenues of \$16.3 billion in 2017 (The Produce News, 2017).

Jubilee Homes continued to go to bat for their Southside neighborhood, obtaining a combination of municipal, county, and state level support over the course of 2013 to 2016 for the estimated \$5.3 million PriceRite project (SIDA, 2015). In 2013, the city council seized 18 tax-

delinquent properties adjacent to the Loblaws building, transferred ownership to the Syracuse Urban Renewal Agency, who in turn resold them to Jubilee Homes. In the same year, the New York State Regional Economic Development Board had awarded Jubilee Homes \$1.2 million in federal funds to carry out the project, giving two separate \$600,000 grants for building renovations (Knauss, 2013; Moriarty, 2017). An additional \$200,000 was donated by New York State Assemblyman, Carl Heastie (Jackson, 2017).

By the close of 2015, the Syracuse Industrial Development Agency (SIDA) held a public hearing for the Southside PriceRite project. During this hearing, Jubilee Homes asked for a payment-in-lieu-of-taxes (PILOT) agreement that would freeze property tax assessments for seven years, gradually phasing out in the three years following (SIDA, 2015). PILOT agreements typically support new businesses getting off the ground. This particular agreement between SIDA and Jubilee Homes is estimated to save \$381,500 in costs for PRRC, Inc. (the lessee, an extension of PriceRite) and property owner, Jubilee Homes (Jackson, 2017). The PILOT agreement was unanimously approved by SIDA the month following the public hearing (SIDA, 2016).

The Onondaga County Green Improvement Fund reimbursed \$200,000 in costs to create a parking lot with permeable pavement and stormwater infrastructure, in line with the Onondaga County “Save the Rain” program to combat faulty combined-sewer-overflow system (Moriarty, 2016). An additional \$672,000 from Onondaga County Economic Development, the City of Syracuse, National Grid Energy Program, sales tax exemptions, and mortgage recording tax exemptions went towards supporting the development of the Southside PriceRite (Table 3).

Table 3. Breakdown of Public Funding for Southside PriceRite.

SOURCE OF PUBLIC FUNDING	AMOUNT (\$)
NYS REGIONAL ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT COUNCIL	1,200,000
ONONDAGA COUNTY GREEN INFRASTRUCTURE	200,000
ONONDAGA COUNTY ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT	200,000
CITY OF SYRACUSE	70,000
NATIONAL GRID ENERGY PROGRAM	100,000
10 YEAR PILOT AGREEMENT	381,500
SALES TAX EXEMPTION	272,000
MORTGAGE RECORDING TAX EXEMPTION	30,000
NYS ASSEMBLYMAN CARL HEASTIE	200,000
	<b>TOTAL \$2,653,500</b>

On June 17, 2016, politicians, Southside activists, and Southside residents came together to celebrate the groundbreaking of the PriceRite supermarket. Less than a year later, on April 2, 2017, the same group was joined by PriceRite President Neil Duffy and Executive Vice President Jim Dorey for the ribbon cutting ceremony for South Avenue’s newest grocery store. Duffy’s public comment regarding the store’s opening reflected the promise the new grocery store would bring to the Southside:

We are privileged to be part of this community and all the great new development that is happening [in the Southside]. Local residents have been waiting for a supermarket for a long time, and we look forward to becoming a vital part of the community and being a good neighbor while providing local shoppers with the outstanding customer service, variety, value and low prices that PriceRite is known for. Our operation is driven by the philosophy that customers should not have to sacrifice quality to save on price, and we are excited to deliver on that promise (Neil Duffy, PriceRite President, quoted in Hannagan, 2017).

Many elected officials had positive thoughts to share regarding PriceRite’s opening. “Projects like these,” Howard Zemsky, Empire State Development President, CEO and Commissioner, reflects, “are helping to fight poverty by generating new jobs and opportunities” (ESD, 2017).

Then County Executive Joanie Mahoney expressed that “the benefits of having a store that sells fresh produce and other healthy foods are even greater than the economic value of adding jobs to the neighborhood” (Moriarty, 2016). Southside residents had a renewed sense of hope for their neighborhood. “This is the best thing we could’ve had in our community in a long time,” stated a Southside resident, “A grocery store right in our community” (Trimble, 2017). Another resident reflected on improved physical access to grocery stores, stating, “For a lot of people who have to walk, the older people, this is great for them” (Trimble, 2017).

A little over a year later, many residents were still pleased. Survey findings indicate 70% of respondents had shopped at PriceRite since its inception in April 2017. Similar to Nojaim’s, location was a major factor in why customers shopped at PriceRite (Figure 16). Location, however, was second to prices of grocery store items in factors that attracted customers to shop at PriceRite. “The prices are right and that’s why people come here, you know?” one customer told me. “I think it’s a good store for people that have to have low-income budgets,” another customer stated, continuing that, “they have good prices and the food is fresh!” Another customer’s response was cloaked in food desert discourse. “I like it, I’m glad that they came here and provided a need in the community,” the customer explained, “it’s nice to have options other than a corner store.”

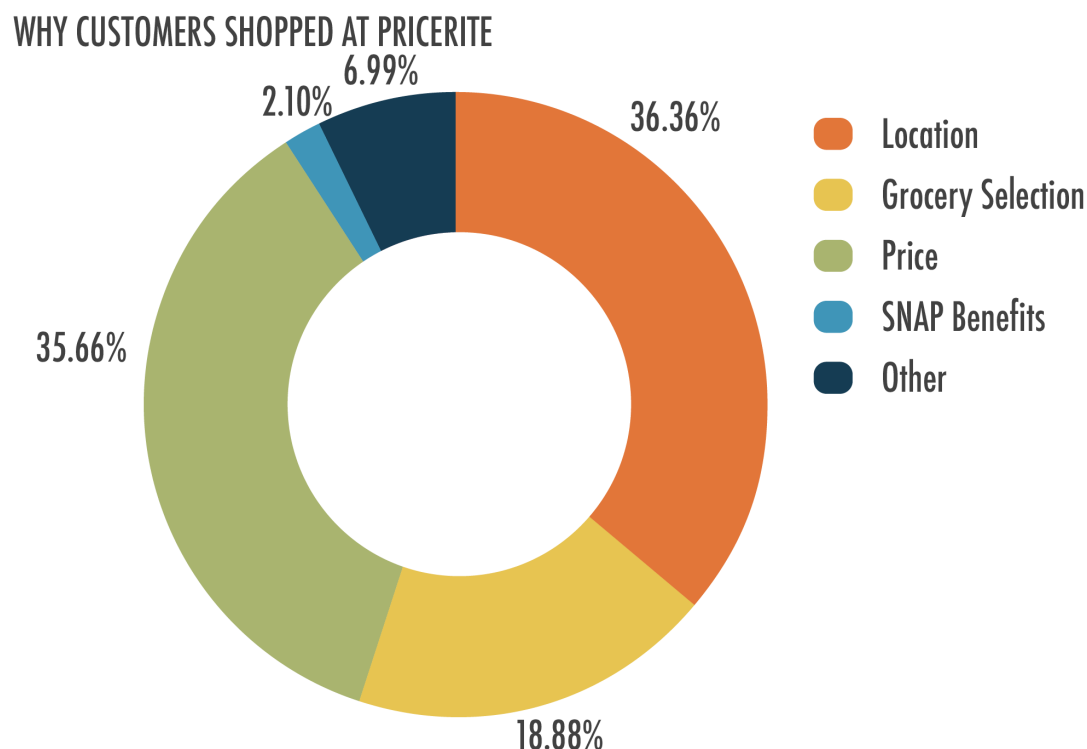


Figure 15. Why Customers Shopped at PriceRite.

The securing of neighborhood, municipal, county, and state level support for a neighborhood grocery store was a major feat for Southside activists. Jubilee Homes' effort to see this project come to fruition is admirable to say the least. Southside activists, residents, and elected officials all had good intentions in supporting the development of a grocery store in a neighborhood in desperate need of increased access to food. This celebratory moment for the Southside, however, marked the start of Nojaim's final descent.

### ***The Nail in the Coffin: Speculation and Nuances***

Five months later, the cheerful celebration of the Southside's victory in improving food access waned. On September 11, 2017, Paul Nojaim announced to his employees that the 98-year-old Nojaim's could no longer stay afloat financially and would close within the next month. Local newspaper headlines, such as "Did government-subsidized Price Rite kill Syracuse's Nojaim Supermarket?" and "Price Rite Vs Nojaim's Supermarket: Is There a Civil War Between

Neighborhoods?” began cropping up, insinuating that the opening of PriceRite was responsible for driving Nojaim’s out of business. Many members of nonprofits and academic institutions as well as Near Westside residents and neighborhood activists joined in on the speculation. Lily, a former member of a nonprofit organization in the Near Westside had already made their mind up on PriceRite’s effects on Nojaim’s.

Well, to me, it’s just as clear as can be. There is absolutely no grey area in this for me. The provision of over \$2 million in incentives for the PriceRite store that was 0.7 miles away from Nojaim’s was unquestionably the reason the store closed and any expert in food distribution or the grocery business – you could show them a map, and say, “Here’s the map. It’s an inner-city neighborhood. Here’s a store that one year ago, went through a major renovation, has a long history, great loyalty in this neighborhood, and here 0.7 miles away is going to be a new chain store that will be able to offer these kinds of prices, etc. What will happen to the Nojaim’s store?” And anyone objectively would look and say, “They’re not gonna make it.”

Others echoed this narrative, pinning the blame on PriceRite opening nearby and expressing concern with the extensive amount of public money that went into funding the project. Virginia, a Near Westside resident, confirms the normalization of the food desert thesis as she speaks about PriceRite in relation to Nojaim’s.

So many people are anti-PriceRite because of what happened... You know, it was really difficult because it’s like it was our neighborhood – our neighborhood. They deserved a store as well as us, but it was a little bit, a little too close. If it had been perhaps a little further down on South Ave. then it might not have affected (Nojaim’s), but I’m not sure... I bought some basic stuff there, but the neighborhood people shopped there because there wasn’t a lot of choices for them to go someplace else. So, to get back to your original point... Save A Lot and ALDIs already had created healthy competition. He already was struggling and then PriceRite put the nail in the coffin so to speak... Some people were blaming the city because PriceRite got certain tax breaks and they shouldn’t have because it was giving competition to this long-lasting family store and yada yada. You know, but that’s the way of the world and you have to be able to compete. I’m not sure that [the tax breaks were] wise and I’ve always kind of felt, as far as tax breaks, I think a business should be able to keep their business going without tax breaks. That’s what I think. If you’re in business to make money, you should be able to do it without help. No one’s helping me.

“I think [PriceRite opening] 100% had an effect on Nojaim’s,” said Stella, a doctor who works in the Near Westside. “In July,” she continued, “we started getting word from Paul that he was worried about it, you know? ... I think he finally closed in September maybe? And I think it was just that. That he was on a real fine line, you know? And I think that it was enough – what do I think? I think there is not a big enough market because of the poverty to handle two grocery stores like that in this area. That’s what I think.” Stella may not have known the exact date of Nojaim’s closure, but she points to the fact that the closure of Nojaim’s had been looming in the distance for some time. Marshall, who had been involved with a nonprofit working in the Near Westside discussed the large economic advantage PriceRite had over Nojaim’s.

The intention of the PriceRite was that it would be working to serve that [food] desert. I think that that’s true in terms of intentions, [but] I think that the reality is what a PriceRite can do that Paul cannot... [is that] PriceRite can come in and spend a year losing money and they’re fine, until Paul, who can’t, closes their store and then they can jack their prices up and now they’re the only game in town. And that’s actually what they’ve just done, right? That’s what transpired.

Most interviewees understood that Southside residents were simply advocating for their own needs.

I don’t blame [Jubilee Homes] one tiny little bit for advocating for what they wanted and needed for their community. [They] did what [they] were hearing from people and what [they] thought was right. So, to me, that’s not where the blame belongs. To me, the blame belongs on policy makers who didn’t say, “Wait a minute, how can we make this a win-win? What other sites are available that wouldn’t close Nojaim’s? What happens if we find a site two miles away? Will the [Southside residents] still be able to have a new store?” ... There was no analysis of what could make it a win-win for both neighborhoods and I think that happens with poor neighborhoods too often. And I don’t think those neighborhoods needed to be pitted against one another.

When approached by reporters, Nojaim first declined to comment. Nojaim’s revenues fell 17 percent from the time PriceRite opened in April 2017 to Nojaim’s September 2017 closure announcement (Moriarty, 2017b). When I sat down with Paul Nojaim in January 2019, he spoke



of the lack of transparency by local, county, and state government officials throughout the PriceRite funding process.

My renovation – I did my grand opening ribbon cutting<sup>15</sup> a couple months before [the PriceRite] announcement. So, I never saw it coming. And so we had been under construction for almost a year. And I had asked, “Are you going to fund anything over there?” Because I would not have spent the money. I had already spent several hundreds of thousands of dollars on design work and what have you; I would’ve stopped and taken that loss and left [the store] the old way. Because now, I’m stuck with the debt. And I probably could’ve survived for some period of time in the old store, because I wouldn’t have had the overhead. But I still would’ve had the leaky roof and everything else. Kind of dumpy store. But I would’ve been around for a while... But eventually, the result would’ve been the same... Had they told me they were going to do this way back when all of these discussions [happened]... Had they said, “Well, tough shit Nojaim. We’re going to fund [PriceRite]. We don’t believe you, we think you’re just some capitalistic pig that just doesn’t want any competition and that’s just the way it is. You’re just the whiney retailer that’s probably making a fortune and what have you despite the fact that there’s no grocery stores anywhere, so, you must be full of shit.” If they had said that to me, I probably would’ve developed the corner differently.

In speaking with Paul as well as many others, he was incessant about his efforts to speak with elected officials regarding the PriceRite project. Paul knew that if PriceRite came to fruition, the end of Nojaim’s would be nearer. However, according to Paul, the lack of transparency in the conversations that were had by several different elected officials led him to believe that PriceRite was not on the horizon. With this mentality, Paul continued to pump money into a grocery store that was unknowingly in the last years of its life.

### ***Food Deserts as a Norm***

A reporter for Food Trade News (2017) notes: “Like a well-oiled machine, Wakefern Food Corp. once again reported record retail sales of \$16.3 billion for the 52-week fiscal year ending September 30, 2017 (a 1.5 percent increase from the prior year).” Wakefern consistently ranks in the top ten domestic food retailers, alongside parent companies of commonly known

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<sup>15</sup> The store was “re-opening” after a \$2.65 million renovation made possible in part by public and private financing (Tampone, 2014).

stores such as WalMart, Kroger, ALDI, and Publix (Progressive Grocer, 2018). So, why would city, county, and state level government officials be so inclined to spend public money on such a thriving corporate business? The answer seemed quite clear for many people. When Syracuse news reporter, Rick Moriarty, interviewed the Regional Operations Director for PriceRite, Josh Bartholomew, he stated that, “It would have been very difficult [to open a PriceRite store in the Southside] because of our margins. It would have made it very difficult without the grant money,” suggesting that government assistance was necessary because of PriceRite’s “historically slim profit margins and the need to keep prices low” (Moriarty, 2017). Jubilee Homes agreed, believing that “without [the government funds], the project would not have been economically feasible and the low-income neighborhood along South Avenue would still not have a full-service supermarket.”<sup>16</sup> A Southside activist stated how Syracuse’s municipal government has provided plenty of public financial assistance to other projects, mostly high-end residential and commercial projects, inferring that the PriceRite project will benefit more low- to moderate-income residents than other projects (Moriarty, 2017).

Wakefern’s successful business strategies stem from longstanding neoliberal efforts by both the federal government and the private sector. The PriceRite grocery store model is predicated on public support emerging from contemporary understandings of food access. The promotion of the food desert narrative by chain grocery stores and supermarkets as well as the federal government through the Partnership for a Healthier America has led the average person to understand food access as solely determined by physical accessibility, most immediately

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<sup>16</sup> Jubilee Homes was transparent in its quest to attract not only any grocery store, but to specifically attract PriceRite, into the former Loblaws building. As noted earlier, Jubilee Homes tried to garner support for a food cooperative before beginning talks with the large chain grocery store. PriceRite had already proven their interest in the neighborhood as well as successfully garnered public support for a location in Rochester, NY, creating a narrative that local politicians could easily get behind.

solved by developing or enhancing grocery stores in the vicinity of poor people. Without such an understanding in place, Southside activists would not have approached elected officials for support. Paul commented on the narrative that drove the PriceRite project.

But even as lenient as [USDA's] definition is, guess what wasn't a food desert by their own definition? The address on South Avenue. But they kept going "food desert, food desert" and that was the justification for all of the money that went in, but it wasn't a food desert by one major player – the state of New York had the Healthy Food Healthy Choice program through Empire State Development and administered by the Low Income Investment Fund. They didn't fund that location because one of the policies is what would the effects be on the closest assets serving the same interest? But the same state of New York Empire Development Corporation from a different fund funded it. How? That's food policy?... I shouldn't be a food desert anymore because I have a grocery store 0.7 miles from me. But tell that to [the soup kitchen] that [food access] isn't an issue.

Paul pointed out the inconsistencies in understanding and defining food deserts, but he doesn't connect back to the broader context. He is correct in that Jubilee Homes did not use the technical definition of food deserts, but, for this reason, healthy food funding streams (such as the HFFI) did not play in a part in financing PriceRite. As long as the discourse suggests an end solution that opens up more chain grocery stores and supermarkets in urban, low-income neighborhoods, public funding will flow and large corporations will continue to profit off the free labor of community activists.

Given the above, Southside neighborhood activists and residents were not wrong to advocate for better access to basic needs in their neighborhood. Rather, they were advocating for the best solution they knew of based on popular discourse around urban food access and historical disinvestment in the Southside. On the contrary, I argue that public officials should have taken deeper measures in assessing the impact of providing extensive funding to a chain grocery store in an urban, low-income neighborhood. Did three levels of government feel that PriceRite could not afford to open a grocery store on its own, or was providing funding to a

grocery store willing to come into the Southside the easiest, most immediate solution? PriceRite operates in 13 other locations across the state, none of which have received as much public attention in their funding processes as the Southside PriceRite has (Moriarty, 2017). If the first Syracuse PriceRite location had no problem gaining a customer base and seeing profits without public funding, then why did this specific store require so much funding? A Syracuse news reporter begged a different question: “Why would a government subsidize one business that’s going to result in the demise of another business?” (Jackson, 2017).

### ***Taking a Closer Look***

People would’ve had a real discussion and would’ve done real work to understand the systems, what real food deserts are, and ways to solve that without harm being done to the community... Unfortunately, that’s not what drove these conversations despite my efforts to bring them to real discussion.

Paul, along with many other interviewees and customers of Nojaim’s, believed that public officials at each level of government did not take the time to understand the broader context and potential risks of providing public funding to support the development of PriceRite. A state audit examining the function of the Syracuse Industrial Development Agency from January 1, 2014 to March 31, 2015 (the same time period as conversations around funding PriceRite were occurring) described a lack of due diligence in the organization’s funding process.

The Board does not appropriately evaluate and award projects or monitor the performance of businesses that receive financial benefits. The Board has not established adequate criteria for project approval or denial decisions. Although the Board has established a Uniform Tax Exemption Policy (UTEP), this policy does not contain all of the criteria the Board purportedly uses when evaluating proposed projects, such as the nature of the project and the number of jobs to be created or retained, and does not include guidelines for claiming sales and mortgage tax exemptions as required by General Municipal Law. Although SIDA officials engage a third party to complete a cost-benefit analysis (CBA) for proposed projects, the CBAs do not adequately compare the community costs against the expected benefits. As a result, the Board may not have all necessary and relevant

data to make project approval or denial decisions or to provide assurance that benefits are awarded through an objective process and the assistance granted has provided adequate benefits to the community (Office of the New York State Comptroller, 2016).

The findings from the state audit are clear: SIDA has been operating inadequately and, as it seems, unethically. During the time that SIDA chose to offer large tax breaks to PriceRite and Jubilee Homes, there was no process put in place to effectively evaluate the “community costs” nor the “expected benefits.” It seems as though the governmental development organization was unable to make informed decisions for the broader Syracuse community because they did not have a uniform, detailed process in place.

As Virginia said, PriceRite was the “nail in the coffin” for Nojaim’s. When speaking with Paul, he was incessant in describing the efforts he took to voice his concerns to public officials about the possibility of PriceRite putting his grocery store out of business. Yet, the red flags raised by Paul and many others were not enough for public officials to reassess their options. When I spoke with Phil, a former planning director for the county, who was in office at the time of PriceRite receiving public funding, he voiced his concern over the loss as well as confusion over what could’ve been done.

Nojaim’s – it was like, just an institution, so to see it close is totally heartbreaking. And we had worked with Paul in the past on other things totally unrelated to PriceRite. We had made some investments in his property and we [supported] him on that. So we never, we never really had a sense of like, how things were going for him. And he would, from time to time, make comments that he was maybe not doing so well, so that always had us worried. And we knew how important Nojaim’s was to the rest of the community in the area. Paul and his staff, his team over there, knew just how to service that community, they always did, so I don’t know what role that PriceRite played in you know, the demise of that operation there. If it was a contributing factor, that would be terrible, but for Nojaim’s to close, whatever the reasons, is a true loss. It’s quite a loss.

Phil does not suggest that the city, county, or state government played a role in the closure of Nojaim's. When I pressed Phil on his role in assessing the PriceRite project, he brought up Paul's concerns while simultaneously distancing himself from any fault in the situation.

I don't know if I could've done anything differently. My role as planning director was to facilitate conversation and I think I did that to a degree that I could. I don't know if you're planning on interviewing the mayor, but he's the one to talk to... He was our economic development director, so you know... Mayor Walsh is definitely the one to talk to about how those conversations went with Paul and what the city was asked for. And that's another thing I should say; I don't know what Paul wanted. We never – he and I never had a conversation about what would really be helpful to him. I assume he had those conversations with Ben or with others, but not with me. So, I'm not sure what he was looking for in terms of support from the city, but hopefully if you talk to the mayor, you'll be able to find out about those conversations, but I don't know what Paul thought the we could do to be helpful. Or if it was just a matter of like, "Hey, don't help the PriceRite." I, I don't know.

Marshall spoke to the differences in business practices between the two grocery stores and how the loss of Nojaim's cannot be easily replicated.

For PriceRite, it's business. And for Paul, it was sociopolitical, socioeconomic, it was about citizenship. You know, nobody is going to go to PriceRite and get an advance on their paycheck for their groceries. People did that all of the time at Nojaim's. Or he would just like, he'd just give people stuff. Not everybody. But he had direct relationships with human beings, who were not, to him, customers. They were human beings. PriceRite only knows customers. And he would employ people and he actively employed people that lived in the neighborhood, which is important in a place where not a lot of people have cars... And Paul, like, I know for a fact around Christmas and Thanksgiving, he would hire people. He did all of these things that were just little things and each thing by itself isn't that big a deal. But when you start to pile them up... that building functioned the way a church might've functioned a hundred years ago, you know what I mean? Paul [helped people] in a different way and really a multivalent way. And PriceRite just isn't going to do that.

Ted stated that when the first PriceRite opened on Erie Boulevard, Paul lost 20% of his business.

"When you think about a business with already razor-thin margins," he said, "losing 20% of your business? That's pretty wild. And I think that's when [Paul] was like, 'Okay, the fact that I've

been viewed as this neighborhood grocer has lost its staying power.” Ted also spoke to the emotional impact the closure had on Paul.

[The closure] hurt him and his family so much financially, of course, but also just personally. [He would say,] “I can’t believe the community would just leave me.” There was a lot of that, like, “Why would they shop elsewhere?” And the reality was like... folks, even living in deep poverty, even with limited or no access to transportation, are still going to do anything and everything in their power to get the cheapest price. And so, you could’ve argued like okay, maybe Paul wasn’t the cheapest always, certainly wasn’t the most expensive, but with some things, he just couldn’t compete because he was an independent grocer. But from an ease of access and from the fact that you think there’s built up customer loyalty, that could not compete with [the fact that,] “Hey, PriceRite’s cheaper.”

Ted spoke to the loss of an embedded grocery store and how that directly impacted its owner, Paul. His customer base was built on loyalty because of Nojaim’s embeddedness in the Near Westside. As discussed in the previous chapter, as capital continues to support supermarkets and provide little in the way of social welfare policy, people are forced to sacrifice the embedded characteristics of Nojaim’s for cheaper food.

In addition to the terminal impact that PriceRite had on Nojaim’s, PriceRite’s and parent company Wakefern’s employment practices have long been scrutinized. The dominant rhetoric around the PriceRite project was that the city was providing the Southside, a neighborhood that has been underserved for years, with a grocery store. In addition to a grocery store, the city prided itself for the creation of jobs through the project.

The government’s support of PriceRite was essentially the government signing onto extracting money from an impoverished neighborhood. Supporters of PriceRite were exuberant when speaking of the jobs that would be created and the wealth that the Southside would see, but without taking a closer look, it’s questionable that adequate economic development in the Southside has actually occurred or will continue to occur (ESD, 2017). The actual number of

jobs created, and the quality of employment need to be analyzed, keeping in mind the long and repetitive history of big business entering low-income areas, driving out other businesses, ratcheting up prices, and then leaving (Greenwald, 2005).

Publicity surrounding the Southside PriceRite often included advertising the 10 full-time and 75 part-time jobs that would be created, with special attention by Dennis Bachman, manager of real estate for PriceRite, to hiring locally. “If they hire enough local talent,” Syracuse New Times reporter Ed Griffin-Nolan states, “then it would be a place that feeds a neighborhood twice. Neighbors could find good food at prices they can afford, and jobs that will help them afford it” (Griffin-Nolan, 2016). The construction firm, VIP Structures, set the stage for intentional hiring practices through the company’s “utilization of a local labor force that represented the neighborhoods the market serves” while building PriceRite (VIP Structures, 2017). VIP Structures developed a construction workforce from five zip codes within the city of Syracuse with high poverty rates with a 29% minority presence (VIP Structures, 2017). Important to note, the jobs that Bachman speak of and those that VIP Structures created are different. Bachman spoke on behalf of permanent retail staff and management positions, whereas VIP Structures is referring to the construction labor force, arguably the most positive outcome of the South Avenue PriceRite project. A report from the Urban Jobs Task Force and Legal Services of Central New York, Inc. spoke to the racial inequities in hiring for construction jobs in the city. The report showed that trade unions working on projects within Syracuse city limits hire a majority of their union members from outside of the city. Moreover, the majority of members are white (UJTF and LSCNY, 2019). VIP Structures choice to work with PriceRite in



consciously hiring minorities for their construction workforce marks an exception to this behavior.<sup>17</sup>

Looking outside of Syracuse, employment at PriceRite seems rather grim as the company has a dismal record when it comes to labor practices. In 2015, the United Food and Commercial Workers International Union, Jobs with Justice, and several other organizations from New York, Connecticut, and Massachusetts protested against working conditions at PriceRite, advocating for better wages and benefits for PriceRite employees. Their “Change PriceRite for the Better” campaign raised awareness of issues related to low wages, inconsistent scheduling, and unpaid sick leave. To continue to raise awareness, a 30-second commercial was aired in 2015 highlighting “PriceRite’s failure to do what’s right.” This commercial aired in Syracuse (UFCW, 2015). A 2015 statement by PriceRite employee, Corey Reed, voiced personal experiences with inadequate employment:

The time for PriceRite to change is now. I work hard every day to try to have a better life, but my coworkers and I struggle to make ends meet. Even though I am available to work full time and request more hours, some weeks they schedule me for as little as 12 hours. My schedule is also unstable with different days and shifts from week to week. PriceRite is hurting hard-working people with low wages, a lack of benefits and inadequate schedules that make it impossible for us to have some control in our lives or take care of our loved ones (UFCW, 2015).

In June 2017, activists from Rhode Island Jobs with Justice (RIJWJ) and Good Food & Good Jobs Coalition advocated for better working conditions for employees. Michael Araujo, Executive Director of RIJWJ commented on the disparities in income distribution throughout the food retail corporation, stating that “PriceRite CEO Joe Colalillo makes more than \$45 thousand per hour, more than four times what the average PriceRite employee makes in a year. The vast

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<sup>17</sup> While an exception, the jobs created by VIP Structures were not union jobs. The construction firm has yet to make similar hiring commitments to other projects.

majority of PriceRite employees are part timers who earn minimum wage or slightly more. Rhode Island minimum wage is just \$9.60 an hour” (Quoted in Ahlquist, 2017). Other concerns raised related to employment were practices of on-call scheduling that require employees to call the store the day of their shift to confirm whether they are working that day (Ahlquist, 2017). In 2001, struggles to come to new contractual agreements between unions and sister company, Shop Rite, resulted in a seven-week strike by employees (Schneider, 2001). A National Public Radio report on raising minimum wages details the story of Terry Williams, a full-time employee at Wakefern and part-time Uber driver. “Both [working for Wakefern and Uber] together still aren’t enough to make ends meet,” Terry Williams expressed (Domonoske, 2016).

### ***Campaigning in the Food Desert***

There has to be a better way than to pick winners and losers. But now [the government] just caused the inverse and now the Near Westside folks have to figure out how to get to that PriceRite... I think the failure and the blame falls to a large degree on, at the time, Ben Walsh. I’m so happy to have him as our mayor, but I think he did not truly either understand or want to hear the negative ramifications of having Paul’s store [so close to the new grocery store].

The concerns above were voiced from Ted, the former Executive Director of a nonprofit working to revitalize the Near Westside neighborhood through economic development. This community member highlights Ben Walsh’s – then in charge of economic development for the City of Syracuse – failure to recognize or react to PriceRite’s potential “negative ramifications.” Ben Walsh was elected as Mayor in November 2017, the same year that PriceRite opened and Nojaim’s closed.<sup>18</sup> While Walsh was campaigning alongside four other candidates, Syracuse news reporters narrated the struggle he faced in obtaining the Black vote. A poll conducted in the

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<sup>18</sup> Ben Walsh ran on the Reform Party ticket against Juanita Perez Williams, a Democrat woman of color, all the while being an heir to a family of Republican congressmen (Baker, 2017). His grandfather, William F. Walsh, served as a Republican congressman and Syracuse mayor during urban renewal.

month prior to the 2017 mayoral election showed that Walsh had support from only 3% of Black voters (Weiner, 2017). Shortly following the poll, Walsh received several endorsements from Black community leaders, including Walt Dixie, executive director of Jubilee Homes and then-head of Syracuse's chapter of the National Alliance Network (Knauss, 2017). Investments in the Southside made by Walsh in his six years of heading the city's economic development should be assumed to be of good faith but could also be seen as personal interests to boost political support in a neighborhood otherwise unlikely to support him. Sharon Owens, a Black woman who at the time was the director of the Southwest Community Center, the largest community center in the City and located just down the block from the new PriceRite, and who received a \$3,000 donation from PriceRite President Duffy for the community center, was named by Walsh to be Deputy Mayor. Owens headed the Southwest Community Center, a multiuse facility that has received heavy support from Walsh.

We've got a mayor now who's appointed for the first time ever a person of color to be the deputy mayor. That person of color is Sharon Owens. Talk about somebody who is plugged in around town with actual humans who are actually living their god damn lives. Sharon Owens is that person. Ben Walsh may not be, but he sure is listening to her and listening to other people and he's responding. So, I mean, maybe a different mayoral regime, maybe that makes a difference? I don't know... we'll see.

Above, Marshall speaks to the connectedness of the new mayoral regime but fails to recognize that the deputy mayor previously worked in the same neighborhood as both Jubilee Homes and PriceRite and was in clear support of PriceRite. While both the Southside and Black community in Syracuse have been historically underserved – still recovering from effects of redlining, disinvestment, and urban renewal – Ben Walsh and the economic development team could've taken a step back to adequately assess how the Southside neighborhood could best be served. With Ben Walsh successfully running for mayor in the years following his decision to

publicly fund PriceRite, it is worth reconsidering whether personal interests in garnering support clouded his ability to critically assess the situation. It could have been the case that, given Jubilee Homes' longtime activism for a grocery store, supporting their efforts was the easiest way to appease Southside residents without having to really think about poverty, jobs, and food access. But, as Figures 17 and 18 show, Republican politicians such as County Executive Ryan McMahon are promoting the apparent success of their decision to fund PriceRite and, in turn, building solidarity with Black residents in Syracuse. And, in recent county meetings, county officials such as Ann Rooney have personally endorsed the county executive, for the "real commitment [he] has made to the public."



Figure 16. On November 4, 2019, the day before local elections, County Executive Ryan McMahon sent out postcards to city residents that promoted his successes in listening to the Southside activists' needs. The front side of the post card shows McMahon standing with County Legislator for the 16<sup>th</sup> District, Monica Williams, in front of PriceRite signage. A quote endorsing McMahon suggests that he puts the public first, providing job opportunities and economic development in the community.

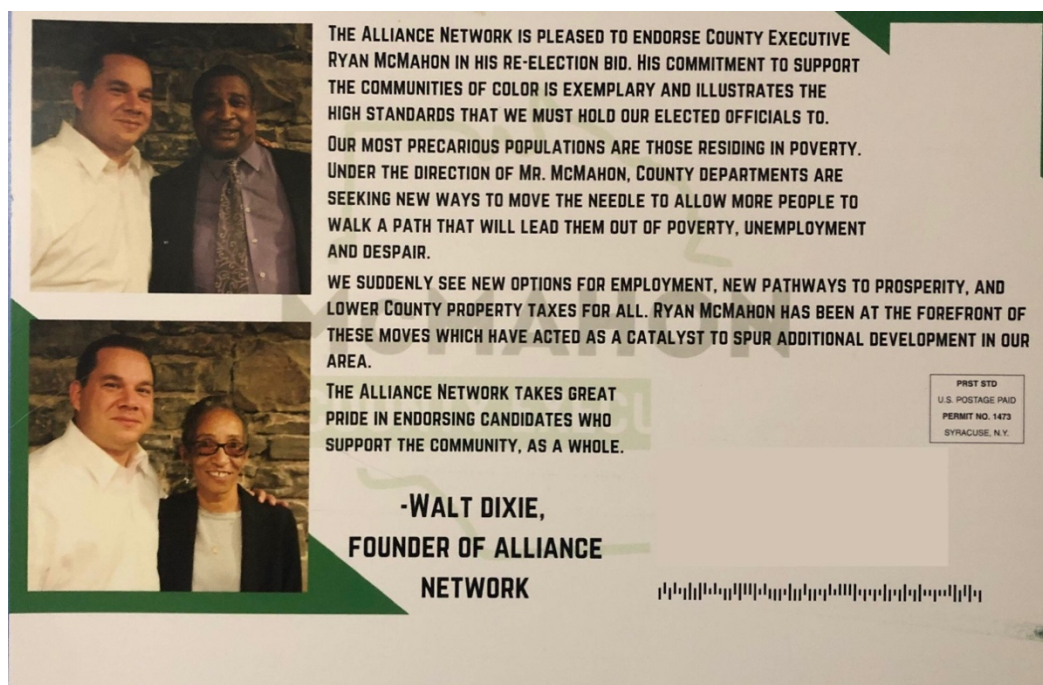


Figure 17. On November 4, 2019, the day before local elections, County Executive Ryan McMahon sent out postcards to city residents that promoted his successes in listening to the Southside activists' needs. The backside of the postcard shows McMahon standing beside each Walt Dixie and Twiggy Billue, Jubilee Homes employees and prominent activists in securing public funding for PriceRite. Walt's quote shows how Syracuse residents of color are trusting in McMahon for his perceived prioritization of their needs.

In contrast to a local grocer whose premise is to keep wealth in the immediate vicinity, funding a \$16.3 billion private corporation extracts wealth from the direct neighborhood. Wakefern's history of employment practices increases the already high levels of precariousness that come with living in poverty. The loss of a grocer that did keep wealth in the neighborhood impeded people's access to food, put people out of jobs, and destroyed a site for community engagement. Questioning the decisions made by Walsh as head of economic development is not to dismiss the fact that the underserved Southside has been in dire need of financial support; However, potential personal interests that would lead Walsh to more heavily fund economic development projects in the Southside should be examined.

The loss of a grocery store, poor working conditions, and a private industry profiting from already empty pockets arguably outweigh the positives of a new supermarket. Reflections

from community members express appreciation for Jubilee Homes and Dixie's longtime efforts and focus more on concerns over lack of government foresight.

[Walt Dixie] is out there hustling on behalf of his community and I can't fault anybody for that. And maybe it's not his responsibility to understand the bigger picture because he's a neighborhood advocate. There's gotta be another layer that's looked at it from a city-wide level... I think we have to be more cognizant when we do economic development of what's the ripple effect of doing something over here to another neighborhood. Interestingly enough, New York State funded both projects. That to me is pretty funny. How could the New York State Regional Economic Development Council give Paul a grant for roughly a million dollars and then two years later, give PriceRite [funding] and not be like, 'Oh man, these are at odds'? And that, to me, is where the system failed.

## **Conclusion**

The ability for Jubilee Homes to garner enough public support from both the Southside neighborhood and elected officials to open a grocery store is laudable. However, as my research shows, the choice to bring a grocery store into the city's Southside is rooted in discourse around food deserts that has long benefitted large corporations, such as PriceRite and Wakefern. Jubilee Homes was simply advocating for the best solution they could understand, which in turn worked in PriceRite's favor, securing large amounts of funding so that the "no frills" shopping experience could continue without any hiccups.

The city, county, and state funding processes suggest a different explanation. I have argued that the agencies involved in funding PriceRite could have taken more action to understand the intricacies and nuances of the problem of food access. Research showed that at least one agency has lacked any formal foresight in their decision-making process, suggesting that decisions to fund projects such as PriceRite are not made in a straightforward and fair manner. Further scrutiny of Ben Walsh's role as head of economic development prior to his time

in office as the Mayor of Syracuse would be helpful. Can someone who is running for office, developing his constituencies, provide unbiased recommendations for funding city projects?

The development of PriceRite in the Southside may have increased physical access to food for those who saw transportation as their biggest hurdle in purchasing food. However, scholars have long refuted the food desert narrative in hopes of a more comprehensive approach to food access that appreciates the nuances and systemic causes of food insecurity. PriceRite does not inherently create entitlements to food for people who struggle to purchase groceries in the first place. Nor does it provide living wage jobs to people in the direct neighborhood to increase the money in their pockets to buy food. The limited understanding of food access in Syracuse resulted in a limited solution to a much deeper problem rooted historically in racist practices in the city that have left the minority populations at a stark economic disadvantage.



## VI. CONNECTING THE DOTS: THE STATE OF FOOD JUSTICE IN SYRACUSE

The so-called failure of programs that aim to reduce obesity in food desert neighborhoods by adding grocery stores and limiting fast food restaurants should serve as a cautionary tale for funders and policymakers. Programs that improve food access matter, but their transformative potential will only be unlocked when such initiatives are connected to systemic networks and narratives for change (Broad, 2016, p. 203).

Food reformers' advice is inviting. It draws on popular notions about individual responsibility and hard work that resonate with the belief that the United States is a meritocracy, a place where individuals can get ahead if they prioritize education and make the right choices. The idea that people have a responsibility to buy sustainably produced food, cook from scratch, and sit down for dinner makes sense. It is something we can do, today... Lots of people are doing their best, every day, to get meals on the table that their kids will eat and that will nourish them and help them grow. Lots of people are "voting with their forks" to support the small farmers in their areas, many of whom struggle to get by themselves. These are good things. But they all rely on *individual people managing to work better, try harder, and commit more*. And when people can't – whether it's because they lack the money, the time, or just the space in their lives for it – they hear that they're failing (Bowen et al., 2019, p. 222-223, emphasis added).

### Picking Up the Pieces



Figure 18. Near Westside residents stand in line in the former Nojaim's parking lot to receive food boxes from the Food Bank of Central New York's mobile food pantry. Photo courtesy of Caroline Schagrin.



In the months following the closure of Nojaim's, conversations around what could be done in the Near Westside flooded the news outlets. The Food Bank of Central New York (Food Bank of CNY) brought their mobile food pantry to the parking lot of Nojaim's to hand out boxes of food to Near Westside residents (Figure 19). Robin, former director of a public health organization, spoke to the charitable "solution" that arose following the closure of Nojaim's.

So, when the store closed, obviously the ripple effect was enormous throughout the community. So, in addition to thinking long term what that space could be, we were just trying to plug holes. So, actually, a colleague of mine was like, "Do you know that the Food Bank is doing a mobile food pantry?" and I had no idea... So I met with the Executive Director and her team and they said, "Well, for a few months, we can come once a month and do a mobile food pantry." And they've been doing that since November [2017] and the last one will be in March [2018] and it's handing out anywhere from 125-150 boxes of fruits and vegetables and staple items. We give those boxes away in less than an hour.

Here, Robin assumed that the mobile food pantry is serving as a placeholder for Nojaim's and that all of the recipients of food boxes were once customers of Nojaim's, who now struggle to access food. Yet, other interviewees I spoke with pointed out the extreme level of need in the Near Westside that existed long before the closure of Nojaim's. Patrice, the executive director of an emergency food program for Central New York, commented on the uncertainty in who was actually served through the mobile food pantry.

From the emergency food side, [Nojaim's] not being there I don't think completely increased numbers at our programs. The mere fact is if a customer is already going to Nojaim's, they were also already going to the [food] pantry... We stepped in with the mobile food pantry... as an opportunity to provide [an] adjustment for folks and still have some access, but I can't tell you that everyone who participated at the mobile food pantry outside of Nojaim's parking lot was a customer of Nojaim's or already a participant or recipient of the food pantry.

Patrice clearly understood the intended role of the food bank, to serve as the emergency food system that supplements peoples' access to food rather than act as the anchor institution for food access. "The contextual point of reality to understand is that Nojaim's was a grocery store access

point. Food Bank and our partners are not grocery stores... We don't have the power to sustain [the mobile market] in the same model in which a retail grocery store would be able to do," she commented. Ted reflected on his thoughts when the Food Bank of CNY was marketed by media as a temporary fix for Nojaim's, connecting food access to the high levels of poverty in the Near Westside.

I kept being like, "Well does that mean, 'Oh man, look, this is why Paul's store should've never closed' or is this just stating how severe the need for food is in that community – and for free food?" And so like, I think to me, people come out for free food because there's such a need for food. So, I thought those two things were getting conflated and I didn't think that was fair. Just because people have these long lines outside of Paul's store for food access doesn't mean that that same amount of people walked through his store and paid for groceries. It seemed that most of them most likely didn't have the means to do that and this was a great opportunity for them... So, that's a really long way of saying that in that neighborhood, there's a huge food access need, not from a [stance that it is] "It is impossible for us to find it" but from a "It is impossible for us to afford it."

Respondents' reflections on the initial measures taken to alleviate food insecurity in the Near Westside in the absence of Nojaim's began to show how practitioners, scholars, and government officials are thinking about food access efforts, poverty, and poor people in Syracuse. The former chapters of this thesis have been used as a way to understand the political and economic systems at play that led to the closure of Nojaim's. This chapter seeks to understand how people make meaning of food access in both the Near Westside and greater city of Syracuse. In my conversations with people, several contradictory viewpoints emerged regarding food access, pointing to the fact that approaches to increasing food access in Syracuse are well intentioned but misguided. People may understand the connectedness between food access and poverty but fail to understand how to properly address this tie. When research participants were asked, "Where do we go from here, now that Nojaim's is gone?" participants suggested patchwork, neoliberal solutions rooted in charity, behavioral economics and

paternalistic views of poor people. Very few participants made connections back to the social safety net and no participants made connections to basic human rights. But, when I asked research participants what the most pressing issues were for people living in the Near Westside, there was a clear understanding that poverty is at the forefront of Near Westside residents' problems. Even still, many believed food insecurity to be solved by something unrelated to increasing individuals' class position. Understanding food access as an issue that can be solved through increased physical access and individual nutrition education reform creates a much more achievable agenda than tackling the underlying issue: poverty. When people did understand that food access is tied to poverty, they presented traditional approaches that fit within the individualized, bootstraps mentality of many Americans. Practitioners' and policy makers' contemporary food access efforts in Syracuse are exemplary of the disconnect between food insecurity and structural conditions that contribute to poverty, and, of course, food insecurity. I argue that practitioners and scholars can begin to redirect their efforts by engaging in food justice activism.

### **Food Justice**

Activists and scholars in the fields of critical food studies, geography, and sociology have long sympathetically yet critically highlighted the disconnect between what food-based nonprofits, charity, and foundations *aim* to do and what they *actually* do (e.g. Poppendieck, 1998; Guthman, 2008; Alkon and McCullen, 2011; Alkon, 2014; Broad, 2016; Fisher, 2017; Riches, 2018). Although these on-the-ground efforts come from good intentions, practitioners' approaches often reproduce dominant stereotypes that suggest poor people do not know how to eat properly or how to control their finances. For instance, nonprofits will host cooking demonstrations with "off-brand" products to show poor people how to eat healthy on a budget.

Practitioners aim to alleviate hunger but do so through education and behavioral reform.

Although they might help alleviate immediate hunger, these approaches miss the mark for their inability to address structural and systemic barriers to food access.

Sarah Bowen, Sinikka Elliot, and Joslyn Brenton (2019) remain sympathetic to the nonprofit industrial complex, where “funding is tight and people want to see immediate results,” which causes “food justice advocates [to] often implement solutions without considering the needs and values of the people who they are trying to help” (p. 226). Agatha Herman, Michael Goodman, and Colin Sage (2018) suggest that food justice “offers a conceptual framework to understand and analyze the broader structural inequities that shape people’s experiences of food systems and potentially contribute towards progressive policy development and social change” (p. 1075). Strengthening the social safety net and advocating for better housing conditions, public transportation, and a living wage for all people in all job sectors are just a few ways in which scholars and practitioners can redirect food access approaches.

## **Conceptions of Food Access**

### ***“Healthy” Solutions***

“We as a society... have lost our agricultural component,” Patrice remarked, explaining what she named her “systemic theory of change” for Syracuse. “We don’t know how to grow our own food, we don’t understand the dimensions of food, we don’t know how to prepare our food,” she continued, placing the blame on what sounded like individual flaws. “We’ve limited our [food access] not only on the criteria of, ‘I can’t get to a store, I don’t have the funds, I don’t have the transportation’ to ‘we don’t even understand unless it comes in a box and a microwave, how to prep it,’” Patrice explained, continuing to state that “systemic change” should happen in the form of nutrition education, cooking lessons, community gardens, and providing

opportunities for people to go to farmer's markets in the area. She went as far to say that people need to be "re-educated" on understanding how to access food and what times of year, such as winter, are bad for growing food. Her suggestions for individual reform through nutrition education and cooking lessons are exemplary of society's broader paternalistic view that poor people do not know how to make "healthy" choices. While some of Patrice's suggestions may connect people back to their food system, such as community gardening and increased presence at farmer's markets, these suggestions alone will not produce structural change.

Ted suggested that corner stores could work to provide healthier prepared meals that could be paid for using SNAP benefit cards. The nonprofit he formerly directed conducted a survey at corner stores in the Near Westside to understand what people were buying.

We found [what people were buying], a lot more than I had anticipated, was prepared foods. That it was wings, pizza, a sandwich, and that they could buy that with EBT. And that, to me, is where this is a much bigger market that we're forgetting about: prepared foods for folks using food stamps. Because, again, whether it's kids that are taking their parent's food stamps... or folks that don't know how to cook or don't want to cook, corner stores become this viable option for them. And the problem with corner stores is it's not healthy, typically all fried and whatever else, but I get it. It's a grab and go type of situation. So, should we be looking in our more impoverished communities to have more sort of grab-and-go options that would be at affordable price points, you could use EBT, and they wouldn't be so unhealthy?

Here, Ted actively opposes the director of the Food Bank's (and many others) idea that poor people do not have proper food prep skills and need behavioral change through education. Ted is considering ways to increase food options that can be purchased using SNAP benefits, but he's not considering the limitations of such an approach that is rooted in the obesogenic environment thesis. The second suggestion Ted provided was Double Up Food Bucks, which is rooted in both market-based and neoliberal paternalistic solutions. The program would double the monetary amount of SNAP benefits that a recipient could use, but is only redeemable for specific,

“healthy” products such as fresh fruits and produce. A program such as this may increase the value of someone’s food stamps, but it nudges (almost pushes) people to buy specific types of foods – “healthy” foods. Where corner store initiatives increase the types of foods available for people to purchase while providing similar, if not equal, economic access, programs such as Double Up Food Bucks have already determined that “healthy” foods will be more economically accessible. In this way, practitioners are able to police the poor’s eating habits.

At a public health conference titled “Food for Thought: Strategies to Increase Access to Healthy Food” in the spring of 2019, practitioners provided pamphlets and handouts regarding their services. One handout, titled “Central New York Food Access & Food Insecurity” included a graph of the food insecurity rate for counties in Central New York while acknowledging that “poverty and unemployment are frequent predictors of food insecurity” (Figure 20). Yet, rather than focusing on the structural causes of poverty in an effort to alleviate food insecurity, the organization’s approach focuses on managing the assumed byproducts of living in poverty. Statistics from 2015 show that roughly one in five people in Onondaga County live “more than one mile from a supermarket or large grocery store in an urban area or more than 10 miles away in a rural area,” reproducing the limited logic of the food desert (Figure 21). The large emphasis on healthy food over simply *access to food* and “making healthy choices easier” are exemplary of the dominant conceptions of the causes and solutions of food insecurity. Additionally, a pamphlet from the Food Bank of Central New York provided an overview of their programming with the headline, “Helping People in Need Transition to Self-Sufficiency.” Programs such as SNAP-Ed and community food security efforts (increasing the purchasing power of SNAP benefits at targeted locations, such as farmer’s markets) are exemplary of practitioners’ persistent push to get poor people to “make healthier choices” rather than get out of poverty.

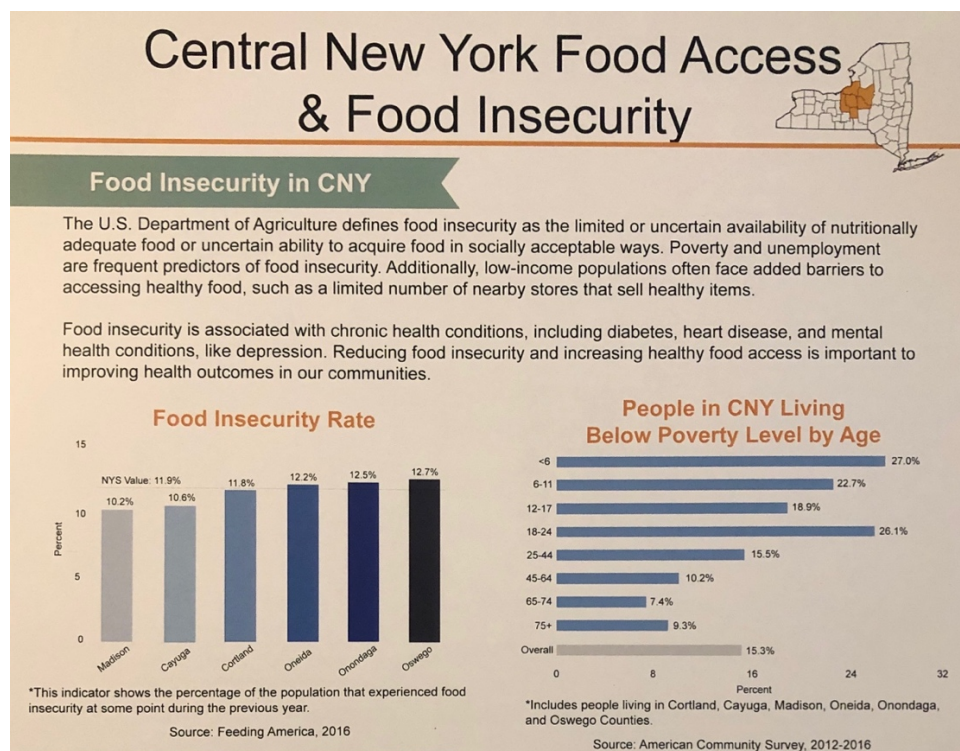


Figure 19. A handout provided by HealthEConnections at a healthy food access-themed public health conference shows food insecurity rates for counties in Central New York. The handout suggests that food insecurity can be reduced by increasing healthy food access.



Figure 20. A handout provided by HealthEConnections at a healthy food access-themed public health conference directly defines a "healthy food environment" as one that has access to a grocery store, reproducing food desert logic.

Ashanté Reese, food studies scholar and anthropologist, spoke to the problematic views practitioners often have when trying to help poor people.

Everything about this country and our food policies suggest that we a) do not trust poor people, b) do not believe poor people know how to make good choices for themselves, and c) we have a disdain for poor people. I am using “we” here to signal that this is a nationwide problem, and we see it in our policies, we see it in much of our philanthropy, and I certainly see it in the assumptions that go into much of the food work that people are getting funding for. We say we believe in choice in this country, that it is a fundamental right—except when you’re poor and a so-called “burden” to the state. I have said this before: while I want people to be healthy, I will always fight for people’s right to have a choice to define that for themselves, live that out for themselves, and have access to everything they need to make that a reality for themselves, even if that doesn’t look like my own definition or life. If I am only willing to advocate because of how I think other people should live, that’s just another form of bondage (Quoted in Turshen, 2018).

Reese’s last line gets at practitioners’ need to constantly impart their views and morals on the people they intend to serve. Not just limited to the respondents I spoke with or limited to the people doing work around food access, attempts to alleviate burdens that come with living in poverty are enacted in a manner that suggests poor people have flawed morals that undergird issues such as food insecurity, housing insecurity, inability to pay bills, low job prospects, poor education, etc. If only those working in social justice and public health fields could ask the same of their clients as they do of themselves, ignore stereotyped class “behaviors,” and begin to acknowledge and address the actual structures that undergird poor people’s livelihoods... then, maybe, the approaches would change.

### ***Market-Based Solutions***

When practitioners attempt to “nudge” poor people to make healthier choices, they do so using neoliberal, market-based solutions. Nonprofits and foundations that look to initiate programs that increase SNAP recipients’ food access through increasing their purchasing power are hindered by the neoliberal USDA funding streams that provide limited funds and are not



intended to be sustainable. Although the program focuses on the ability to afford food through entitlements, such an approach does not actively address the inadequacies of the social safety net or other structural causes of food insecurity. Similarly, the push by others to allow grocery delivery services to accept SNAP and WIC would increase recipients' physical accessibility but would not address structural causes of food inaccessibility.

"The business community needs to be a part of the solution as well," stated Robin, a former director of a public health organization that partnered with Nojaim's on public health initiatives. "I think the game changer will be the home delivery of groceries. Right now, you can't use your SNAP benefit EBT cards for home deliveries because of the technology with the EBT card and there's a PIN associated with that. That is being piloted actually with a USDA grant in a few grocery stores in New York," she continued. Robin suggested that this would increase food accessibility for SNAP recipients with disabilities but made no remarks about the broader population who continues to struggle with food access. Again, the solution to address food access was rooted in neoliberal government funding streams that do not guarantee sustainability. Phil, a former planner for the city of Syracuse and Onondaga County suggested the need for "healthy competition," having an even mix of supermarkets, chain grocery stores, and independent grocery stores.

I mean, if you believe what Paul's saying about the economics of the situation, then you would think there's no way that a grocery store could go into the Near Westside, because it couldn't be justified. The numbers just wouldn't pencil based on the PriceRite. So, you know, if Paul's right about that, then I guess we won't see another store in the Near Westside. Any neighborhood that struggles with access to real food, I would hope that over time we would see more grocers at that scale operate in neighborhoods like the Near Westside and other neighborhoods that need that. So, you know, my hope is that the city will continue to try to work with people to make those things happen.

As Chapter 3 showed, independent grocery stores and even region-based chain grocery stores have long struggled to exist amongst the grocery store landscape because of the many policies and changes in trade classifications that were enacted to favor big business. Phil did not have a clear-cut solution outside of the market as to how the city or the county could better support poor people's ability to access food. From a planning standpoint, different sizes of businesses may be ideal, but with current trade classifications in place, unless cities take more action to ensure that smaller businesses can thrive, we will continue to see smaller grocery stores go out of business.

Practitioners' and politicians' responses were in line with contemporary understandings of food access and rooted in both stereotypes of the poor's assumed uniform lack of knowledge around how to eat healthy and the obesogenic environment thesis. Yet, when the same group was asked about the most pressing issues for Near Westside residents, food insecurity did not make the cut.

### **Conceptions of the Near Westside**

When I asked practitioners, government officials, and scholars what they felt were the most pressing issues in the Near Westside, many were quick to point out contributors to poverty, such as lack of employment, lack of neighborhood economic development, and lack of homeownership in the neighborhood. Others pointed out byproducts of living in poverty: neighborhood violence and crime and corresponding concerns around safety as well as drug usage and dealing. Ted reflected on the various economic development efforts in the neighborhood throughout the last decade.

It's going to be hard for a neighborhood to be thriving with [40 or so percent] unemployment. And then this whole idea of how do you deconcentrate poverty? Like how do you disrupt it and change it? ... Is public housing still a model that this country or city should embrace? ... So, yeah, I do think that some of our

housing policies and our employment opportunities have caused the destruction of [the Near Westside] and I think for so long, in particular [for] unemployment, [people keep] thinking like, “Oh, Carrier will come back!” or “If we just had a Ford plant here, we’d be all set.” And [I’m] like, no big employer is coming here. It’s just not happening. So, we need to start looking at it more from like an incremental development process, which is going to be much harder, but it’s also going to allow for money to stay directly in the community. It’s going to mean having a lot of 10-person businesses or 5-person businesses and each one of those is painstaking to get off the ground and going... but, like, the Delavan Art Center or the Rockwest Building, those are all examples of 2-20 person businesses that are like, doing pretty well. And like, let’s just keep building those.

During my tour of the Near Westside, I questioned how much these economic development projects were helping the Near Westside and how much they were setting the stage for gentrification. The Delavan Art Center, the Rockwest Building, SALTspace, La Casita, and the many LEED-certified houses and buildings are not “workforce hubs” for Near Westside residents (Figure 22). During the tour, I was welcomed into one of the LEED-certified homes that won an energy-efficient design award in 2009. Syracuse University’s School of Architecture, a nonprofit housing agency, the Syracuse Center of Excellence, the Near Westside Initiative, and an architecture firm collaborated to create the “Live Work Home.” Marketed as a model for sustainable and affordable housing, the home was sold to a white male Syracuse University professor at a subsidized rate of \$80,000 before construction was complete (Morelli, 2009).<sup>19</sup> Respondents who had long worked in the Near Westside reassured me that gentrification was not something this neighborhood would ever see. However, at the 2019 Upstate Latino Summit, organized by the Spanish Action League (La Liga), a current Near Westside practitioner stated that these previous efforts were “basically white development” and “an academic exercise.” Even more so, the practitioner commented on the Near Westside

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<sup>19</sup> Total construction costs were estimated at \$150,000; A state grant subsidized the difference in costs (Morelli, 2009).

Initiative's inability to hire directly from the neighborhood for low-skill jobs, such as janitorial work, in the buildings that came to fruition through their efforts.

## NEAR WESTSIDE INITIATIVE EFFORTS

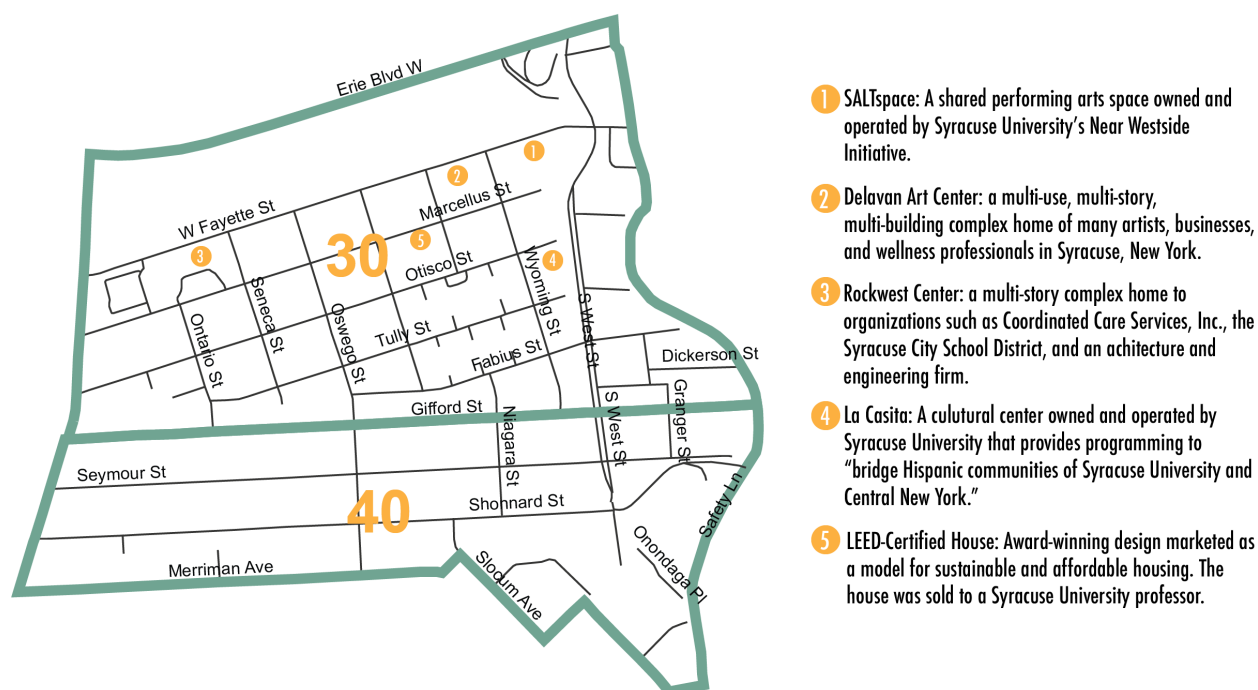


Figure 21. Near Westside Initiative Efforts. All descriptions were either taken directly or adapted from each organization's website.

Similar to Ted, Phil, a former planner spoke about the need for economic activity and employment opportunities. His fairly vague answer suggested that poverty is complex and challenging and that "growing jobs within these communities ought to be the proper way to let people out of poverty." Whereas the former nonprofit director and former planner advocated for more employment and economic development opportunities in the Near Westside, other respondents were focused on byproducts of living in poverty. Lily, a former vice president for community development at Syracuse University expressed the dire need for increased community policing in response to safety concerns in the neighborhood.

Well, I think that what always, under any circumstances, in any neighborhood, what works is to have good community policing and to instigate honest conversation and get the bad feelings out on the table and see if there are some solutions that can be

found... I think that the neighborhoods need really, really effective community policing because tensions are high there and I think they need cops on the street.

Similarly, Robin pointed out that the absence of a grocery store in the immediate vicinity would put Near Westside residents at risk when walking to a different grocery store. “If you don’t feel comfortable because there has been an uptick in drug sales and drug usage in the neighborhood and that now precludes you from going to [a different] grocery store, health and food access is so much more than having that grocery store there. It’s about the convenience and feasibility of actually getting to the store.”

While I remain sympathetic to those who experience physical barriers to accessing food, surveys conducted at both Nojaim’s and PriceRite found that the majority of people getting to grocery stores use cars. Policing may simply convict innocent folks of misdemeanors and place them in a criminal justice system that is often anything but just for people of color (Durr, 2015). Sandy, a priest in the Near Westside, also highlighted crime, and, in doing so, more blatantly connected crime to behavioral flaws.

Young people in the neighborhood don’t go to church. So they hang out. If they had job education training programs... that would be a very important thing to help these young people, because drugs are a very big problem... Last night the cops were down here because a guy was sitting on the front porch waiting for his drug pick up. Across the street is a drug house, you know. Our custodian picks up needles all of the time. Yesterday, a bunch of needles were out in the parking lot by the food pantry, you know... So, you know, poverty, no job, drugs... Job training would be great if they get the kids into it.

However, as I explain above, the effectiveness of job training programs in getting people jobs that would lift them out of poverty is questionable and many programs are, as Sandy would agree with, rooted in behavioral changes (Purser and Hennigan, 2018; Hennigan and Purser, 2019). Just as people attempting to increase food access inevitably end up policing poor people’s eating habits, people attempting to increase employment opportunities inevitably end up policing

poor people's ways of living, assuming that, as a class, poor people can be assumed as a group to make similar choices and behave in similar ways; that poor people are cast into this class because of their own individual shortcomings.

### **Food as a Tool for Social Change<sup>20</sup>**

"If people have money in their pocket, then everything changes. And if people don't have money in their pocket, it's this downward cascade," Stella, a Near Westside doctor stated, responding to what she felt were the most pressing issues in the neighborhood. Most interviewees narrowed their responses to my questions to the specific topic I was asking. For instance, when I asked about food access, people presented market-based and neoliberal solutions, often rooted in nutrition education and the obesogenic environment thesis. When I asked about pressing issues in the neighborhood, people focused on employment, housing, neighborhood safety, and economic development. Two respondents, however, made the connection between food access and poverty.

Lack of work. Work. And jobs that are of a living wage. You know? Even our secretaries. We had a secretary that worked in our office that quit because she was working full-time [here] and full-time overnight and she was sleeping like three hours a day. And that was to have a middle-class lifestyle. And her wife was also working that... A livable wage is really important. And having any sort of job opportunity – if people have money in their pocket, then everything changes. And if people don't have money in their pocket, it's this downward cascade. And even people who do have money in their pocket still make bad choices for their health. I've got plenty of money in my pocket and I had candy for lunch... I know how bad smoking is, but yet I see people smoke all of the time. Behavioral change is hard at a baseline and when you have tons of other problems, you know, just making ends meet, like feeding your kids, daycare, you know, any of that stuff – it's impossible to have any sort of real change in your life that's possible... There are definitely people that are having food scarcity. I think the question is *why* they're having food scarcity. I think giving a hand out isn't necessarily going to be the solution. The solution is more jobs, you know? I know that sounds like a broken record, but if people have a viable way to earn their income, people are going to do that. People don't want to be on welfare... Yeah, sure, there's some small subset

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<sup>20</sup> Credit for this phrase is owed to Evan Weissman.

that do. But that's not the average person. Working gives people a sense of purpose and dignity and that's what every human wants.

Stella gets at the many other challenges people face when living in poverty, highlighting that people simply do not have the time to prioritize dietary choices when they're overcome with the stress of determining whether to pay their rent or their electric bills. Similar to Bowen et al.'s (2019) argument in their study of families who are underserved by the social safety net, "We can't keep asking people to do better. Doing so ignores the challenges facing families. Whether it's a family member's illness or death or the grinding demands of paying the bills, many parents are experiencing chronic stress. The way we eat is also inextricably linked to social inequality" (p. 223). Even so, Stella points out the contradictions of nutrition education-focused food access solutions. She, too, makes "poor" dietary choices, yet she does not receive the criticism that her patients do.

Ted also suggested the need for employment as a solution to food access. "You could put a food pantry on every corner and you're still sort of going to have the same problem," he explained. "So, I guess food pantries, to me, are not the solution... And the same thing with the Rescue Mission, right? I don't think the goal of the Rescue Mission was to feed the same 700 people three meals a day, but it's what's happening." Here, Ted is hinting at the need for more than a temporary fix. Stella and Ted both acknowledge the ineffectiveness of contemporary food access solutions, but do not make the ultimate jump in understanding how to use food as a tool for social change. Without having time or funds to devote to deconstructing and critiquing the logic that undergirds contemporary food access approaches, practitioners will continue to miss the mark.

## **Pushing for Food Justice**

The dominant approach to food access in Syracuse is rooted in public health narratives which are ultimately rooted in individual behavioral change and the obesogenic environment thesis. Where two respondents connected food accessibility to the amount of money in one's pocket, no respondents suggested highlighting poverty and lack of access to other resources when they spoke of food accessibility. Instead, they suggested market-based, neoliberal solutions that act as patchwork fixes at best. People working on-the-ground in Syracuse, either as nonprofit members, planners, or politicians, are overlooking broader structures that contribute to food access and remain insistent on changing assumed individual flaws of people living in poverty and/or increasing physical access to healthy food. The conversation around food access needs to change from nutrition education, nudging, and increasing physical access to healthy foods to advocating for a stronger social safety net that provides more support to people who are at a structural and systemic economic disadvantage. Once we have a social safety net that upholds its job to catch people when they fall, we can begin to think about the possibilities for food access that exist beyond the hands of large corporations and the conventional food system as we know it.

Chad Lavin (2009) shows how eating locally has become the solution for ensuring the economic survival of growers and farmers. This solution also pushes poor people to eat healthier and consumer better, which “reflects the reduction of social and political life to market relations.” Moreover, Lavin (2009) argues that this framing “inevitably participates in a political condition in which citizenship has been reduced to consumerism, and the very ability to conceptualize political action or individual freedom has been captured by the logic of the market... [it] produces the market as the solution to political problems.” Scholars argue that



community-based food justice activists can and should be engaged in social justice efforts and collective movements beyond food (Broad, 2016). Right now, in Syracuse, collective action is happening on several fronts.<sup>21</sup> Through the lens of food justice, activists, practitioners, scholars, and residents experiencing poverty can collaborate to speak about problems with food access, housing, healthcare, lack of employment and the structures and systems that have produced such conditions. When the Southside demanded a grocery store as well as when the Near Westside lost a grocery store, Syracuse residents, practitioners, politicians, and scholars were provided an opportunity to call attention to the ways in which food access is inextricably tied to poverty. We do not need to wait for another grocery store to go out of business to shift the narrative from talking about food deserts, obesity, and nutrition education to talking about structural poverty and the enduring effects of historical processes such as disinvestment, white flight, and urban renewal.

In food studies literature, the demand for an alternative food system is clear. However, the importance and effectiveness of the grocery store, a direct product of capitalism, should not be overlooked. The convenience and immediate physical access that a grocery store affords people suggests that rather than deconstructing the conventional food system entirely, we should begin to think about ways to dismantle current structures and systems that largely benefit large corporations. A study by Justin Meyers and Christine Caruso (2016) suggested the possibility of a government-run system of grocery stores, similar to commissaries and state-run liquor stores. Placing the power in the hands of the government rather than large corporations, such as Wal-Mart and PriceRite, could be instrumental in changing economic access. Meyers and Caruso (2016) argue that, through publicly-owned grocery stores, change is possible.

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<sup>21</sup> In the past year, collective organizing efforts around tenants' housing rights and farmworkers' labor rights have seen tremendous success (Eisenstadt, 2019; Weiner, 2019).

To counter these inequities and realize food access for low-income communities requires a turn away from the neoconservative and neoliberal state towards the affirmative state, a state that not only sets conditions for how markets operate, corrects market failures, and steers markets towards reducing poverty and inequality, but also de-commodifies certain aspects of life or lowers their market costs based on a human rights framework that privileges social need (p. 32).

The conventional food system *can* and *should be* restructured. Large corporations should not be allowed to determine, through price points, who does and who doesn't get to buy food at their grocery store. We can easily do more than increase the number of grocery stores or the amount of "healthy" food available in a neighborhood. We need to rise above solutions rooted in education, turning the mirror around as often as possible to eliminate approaches that are bourgeois and founded on gravely mistaken stereotypes. Arguing first for the expansion of entitlements will be key. Then, we need to find ways where we can reclaim power over the food system. Collective organizing against the structures and systems that have contributed to our current neoliberal, defunct government are necessary in achieving both expanded entitlements and the redistribution of power.

In the next chapter, I reflect on the eight months I spent sitting and eating with poor people at a soup kitchen in the Near Westside. I gathered similar findings to those of Bowen et al. (2019) and Broad (2016), where people living in poverty are faced with tough choices day in and day out. Where scholars have advocated for strengthening the social safety net and connecting food inaccessibility to poverty by highlighting the lived experiences of poor people, my research theorizes a possible path forward for redirecting conversations around work and deservingness in America. If we can dismantle dominant stereotypes of poor people and recipients of social welfare programs by highlighting the work required to be a recipient of state support, then we can clearly justify the need for increased entitlements.

## VII. THE REPRODUCTIVE LABOR OF POVERTY

On a blistery day in January 2018, after weeks of traversing rather aimlessly through the snow-covered streets of the Near Westside, hoping to talk with former Nojaim's customers but unsure of where to find them, I found myself at the entrance of a soup kitchen. I sat down for the next few months with a plan to eat and talk with residents about the closure of Nojaim's, what the store meant to them, and to allow them the opportunity to reminisce on any stories they had to share. When I received permission from the soup kitchen volunteers to talk with residents, they were ecstatic for the opportunity to capture stories around what was considered by so many to be the cornerstone operation of the Near Westside.

However, I quickly learned that, for the soup kitchen regulars I ate with, the loss of Nojaim's was rather insignificant in comparison to other, more pressing matters. The residents I spoke with were living in extreme poverty and did not consider food access to be the most pressing challenge in their lives, as most of them depended on charity and emergency food systems for food. Soup kitchens are one aspect of the charity-based emergency food system that have effectively kept extremely poor people from going hungry, as poor people attend not just for emergencies, but for a consistent source of food. As Eddie, a soup kitchen regular, told me, poor people have a "lotta food, [but] no money." Rather, these poor residents' days were consumed with finding safe and affordable housing, navigating the social welfare system, and securing reliable employment. Although many other of the neighborhood's residents' access to food was hindered through the grocery store closure, including the store's regular customers, the poorest residents had more immediate concerns. People do not have the luxury of worrying about physical access to or the nutritional value of food if they cannot afford to purchase the food, do not have proper facilities for cooking, or do not have a permanent residence.

In this chapter, I offer a path forward for policymakers to advocate for increased social welfare supports that would in turn increase food access. I first provide an overview of welfare reforms founded on the prevailing negative stereotype that poor people are lazy and uneducated. Because of this misconception, policymakers have promoted work and job training as requirements for receiving social assistance. Through ethnography, scholars (e.g. Auyero, 2011; Purser, 2012; Edin and Shafer, 2015) have invalidated dominant perceptions that denigrate poor people and show how they are constantly having to navigate both the social safety net and social class dynamics fueled by stigma and judgment. Using my ethnographic findings alongside governing vernacular around deservingness and work, I develop a theoretical approach that aims to shatter dominant misconceptions of poor people and ultimately strengthen a political argument in favor of increased state support for programs such as the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP).

### **Working (Harder) to Eat (Less)**

The close of 2018 came with both the beginning to a 35-day United States federal government shutdown as well as the end of a months-long compromise to revise and renew the United States Farm Bill. SNAP, formerly known as food stamps, is a federally funded social welfare program through the United States Farm Bill that assists people in their ability to afford groceries. The anti-hunger program supported roughly 40 million people in 2018, greatly reducing food insecurity in the United States (CBPP, 2019).

As discussions around the Farm Bill came to a close, the US Department of Agriculture proposed implementing stricter work requirements for SNAP recipients. “Long term reliance on government assistance has never been part of the American dream,” Sonny Perdue, United States Secretary of Agriculture, argued at the time (Rogers and Edmondson, 2018). Such a proposal

would've put 755,000 current SNAP recipients at risk of losing their eligibility (Politico, 2018). The nearly five week long government shutdown ended without the work requirements making their way into the Farm Bill, but conversations surrounding stricter work requirements for SNAP recipients have yet to fizzle out. In the 2020 budget request in March 2019, President Trump proposed to cut \$220 million from SNAP, impose stricter work requirements, and transition from cash benefits to food box deliveries with shelf-sturdy items (Rabinowitz and Uhrmacher, 2019). These conversations signify a crumbling social safety net that, given the current administration's views surrounding welfare, is expected to serve fewer and fewer people.

Though dealing specifically with food access, then, at the heart of this political issues lies the increasingly precarious federal social safety net that millions of Americans depend on for their own livelihoods. Scholars have long written about the byproducts of living in poverty and relying on the social safety net. Kathryn Edin and Luke Shafer's *\$2.00 A Day* explores the rise in what they coin "\$2-a-day poverty," the cash incomes that, "in early 2011, 1.5 million households with 3 million children were surviving on... per person, per day, in any given month" (2015, p. xvii). Much of this rise is attributed to President Clinton's 1996 Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act (PRWORA), welfare reform legislation that quickly reduced the amount of families eligible for Temporary Aid for Needy Families (TANF) as a way of "promoting employment" (Edin and Shafer, 2015). "Before 1996," Edin and Shafer express, "welfare was putting a sizable dent in the number of families living below the \$2-a-day threshold. As of early 1996, the program was lifting more than a million households with children out of \$2-a-day poverty every month. Whatever else could be said for or against welfare, it provided a safety net for the poorest of the poor" (2015, p. 7).

The 1996 PRWORA was indicative of deeply entrenched national opinions of the welfare system and its dependents. “Welfare policy in the United States has long been closely connected to the nation’s cultural vision of the appropriate commitment to work,” Sharon Hays explains in her 2003 book, *Flat Broke with Children: Women in the Age of Welfare Reform* (p. 13). As early as the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the dominant American viewpoint has been one that requires a person proves their worth of survival through working. Stemming from the capitalist requirement for labor-power, people are no longer deemed “deserving” if they cannot work (Marx and Engels, 1978 [1867]; Piven and Cloward, 1971; Macarov, 1980). Because of this archaic moral distinction, scholars have asserted that a welfare system will not be successful if it does not mesh with traditional “American values” (Edin and Shafer, 2015). Expanding on economist David Ellwood’s famous remarks on welfare in his 1988 book, *Poor Support*, Edin and Shafer write, “Ellwood concludes that if government aid to the poor could be restructured in such a way as to promote work and promote family, perhaps the American public would come to be more generous” (p. 19, 2015). Later on, Edin and Shafer assert that:

Reverting to the old welfare system [referencing the welfare system prior to the 1996 PRWORA] is not the answer. The flaws of that system were too deep. Ellwood’s basic premise remains as true today as it was twenty-five years ago: any response to the rise in \$2-a-day poverty must be in line with America’s values. This is not merely an argument about political feasibility. *The primary reason to strive relentlessly for approaches that line up with what most Americans believe is moral and fair is that government programs that are out of sync with these values serve to separate the poor from the rest of society, not integrate them into society.* The old welfare system had the virtue of providing a floor of cash income for those in need, but it exacted a heavy price. To be a welfare recipient was to wear a scarlet letter in the eyes of your fellow Americans. The old welfare separated its claimants from the mainstream. It may even have accepted a class of outcasts forced to trade their sense of citizenship for relief (2015, p. 158, emphasis added).

Has the social safety net we know today not molded into what Ellwood, Edin, and Shafer spoke of in both 1988 and 2015? Today, the social welfare policy looks to promote work in a

variety of ways. Workfare programs are marketed as a way to move welfare recipients into positions of work, but without giving the welfare recipient an actual income. Rather, by the welfare recipient consistently showing up to work, they prove their “deservingness” of their own welfare benefits. Jamie Peck, author of *Workfare States*, critiques the effectiveness of workfare programs:

Contemporary workfare policies rarely involve job creation on any significant scale, along the lines of the old-fashioned public-works programs; they are more concerned with deterring welfare claims and necessitating the acceptance of low-paid, unstable jobs in the context of increasingly ‘flexible’ labor markets. Stripped down to its regulatory essence, workfare is not about creating jobs for people that don’t have them; it is about *creating workers for jobs that nobody wants* (2001, p. 6, emphasis added).

In addition to workfare programs, nonprofits, charities, and educational institutions are rolling out job readiness programs as a mechanism to provide welfare recipients with the skills and tools employers are looking for. However, recent studies suggest that some of these programs, faith-based organizations in particular, are misguided in their efforts and do not provide welfare recipients with adequate job preparation (Purser and Hennigan, 2018). Rather, leaders from these organizations choose to impart their own wisdom on participants, preaching obedience and civility as the key to a financially stable future (Purser and Hennigan, 2018). Through both workfare and job readiness programs, participants are left underserved and remain dependent on an insufficient social safety net (Lafer, 2002).

Cultural anthropologist Maggie Dickinson (2016) examined the transition towards state-mandated work requirements, showing the ways in which people are closed out of the social safety net if they do not exhibit adequate citizenship vis-a-vis work. “Welfare programs no longer target the neediest Americans. Rather, they increasingly benefit the working poor who have access to formal employment and regular wages,” Dickinson notes (p. 272). Similar to

contemporary understandings of food access rooted in neoliberal thought, these neoliberal welfare reforms ultimately make people less secure vis-à-vis food.

With the failures of work-for-welfare programs to reinsert people into stable employment, it seems as though another approach is in need. And, in light of the recent push for stricter work requirements for SNAP, a shift in thinking could be pivotal in salvaging what does remain of the social safety net. Through eating and talking with people at a soup kitchen in the Near Westside, I show that while poor people may not have formal or adequate employment to prove that they are working and, therefore, “deserving,” they still perform various types of unpaid work in an attempt to receive and maintain social welfare benefits as well as navigate charity. I refer to this unpaid work as the “reproductive labor of poverty,” as these actions are required for poor people to meet their basic needs.<sup>22</sup> Providing a term to conceptualize this mandatory, unpaid work may help policymakers, practitioners, and academics alike better understand paths forward for strengthening the social safety net. If we do not acknowledge the labor that poor people do as a prerequisite to their own survival, the social safety net will continue to function inadequately.

### **Welfare, Work, and Stigma**

Jane Collins and Victoria Meyer hinted at a conceptualization of the unpaid labor poor people do in their 2010 book, *Both Hands Tied: Welfare Reform and the Race to the Bottom in the Low-Wage Market*. Collins and Meyer argue that welfare should be viewed a necessary mechanism for social reproduction, explaining that:

The concept of social reproduction has its roots in Marxist social science, where it refers to the renewal of classes and class relationships over time. Feminist scholars have reworked the term, using it to refer to the labor necessary to keep households and communities functioning and to allow them to send productive members out

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<sup>22</sup> For a broad discussion on social reproduction and reproductive labor, see *Social Reproduction Theory: Remapping Class, Recentering Oppression* edited by Tithi Bhattacharya (2017).



into the world to work. In this sense, it entails the activities involved in reproducing and supporting family members [and oneself] from day to day, as well as from generation to generation. While we often gloss social reproduction as child care, it also includes care for the ill and the elderly, the work of consumption, cooking, cleaning, paying bills, talking to teachers and doctors, taking children to activities, organizing transportation, and dealing with landlords, utility companies, and banks (2010, p. 10).

Scholars at the intersections of work, labor, and poverty have identified a few cases in which poor people engage in unpaid labor as a means for survival. Sociologist Javier Auyero (2011) observed poor people's experiences waiting in social welfare offices in Brazil to show the dehumanizing, inconsistent, and time-consuming nature of receiving and maintaining state support. "The welfare agency's modus operandi is, in other words," Auyero explains, "defined by its arbitrariness. Sometimes people have to wait long hours, sometimes not. Sometimes they are paid, sometimes not. The rescheduling of payments is a recurrent event" (2011, p. 105-6).

Poverty and labor scholar Gretchen Purser's ethnography of day laborers in Oakland and Baltimore revealed the waiting and uncertainty required by people as a prerequisite for possible employment, however precarious and temporary it might be (2012). Studies of soup kitchens often incorporate stories of those who reflect on waiting (Auyero, 2011; DiFazio, 2006; Ozolina-Fitzgerald, 2016; Poppendieck, 1998). Dickinson's work aligns closest with mine, studying the lived experiences of those tied to or nixed from the social safety net. "Welfare benefits, retooled as work subsidies," she argues, "have become a sorting mechanism – both sorting the deserving from the undeserving poor and *sorting the work that is rewarded from the work that remains unrecognized, unremunerated, and unsubsidized*" (2016, p. 278-279, emphasis added).

Recognizing the labor people engage in when they are constantly subject to waiting on charity as well as the state to be able to access basic needs of life, such as shelter, is an initial step in putting forth a broader conception of the reproductive labor of being poor.

The ability to physically access basic needs through charity and the state sits within a social sphere also requiring navigation. Poor people have historically been stigmatized based on their class status by both their peers and those outside their class (Piven and Cloward, 1971; Katz, 1996). Initial stigmatization is produced through a series of power dynamics, stereotypes, dominant cultural beliefs, and a separation of self from a larger group. Most importantly, Link and Phelan (2001) argue, “people are stigmatized when the fact that they are labeled, set apart, and linked to undesirable characteristics leads them to experience status loss and discrimination” (p. 371). Moreover, “Stigma is a key component of processes of social exclusion because, almost by definition, people who are stigmatized are negatively valued and are, therefore, vulnerable to exclusion” (Reutter et al., 2009).

Stigmatization that is first projected by higher classes onto lower classes is reproduced by the lower-class members themselves through a sort of cognitive distancing (Reutter et al., 2009). “The strategy of cognitive distancing,” Reutter et al. (2009) explains, “suggests that participants do not necessarily refute the social identity per se, but distance themselves from it by arguing that it does not reflect their own personal identity” (p. 306). Low-income people engage in the same components of stigmatization even when they are themselves a part of a stigmatized group.

Engaging in stigmatization within an already stigmatized group can create a lack of solidarity and inclusion in broader class dynamics (Reutter et al., 2009). The purpose of reproducing stigma in this case has been seen to keep a positive sense of self by placing oneself above others through their actions. Sociologist Loic Wacquant pulls from debates on stigmatization and distancing to further expand on the consequences of such a social atmosphere (2008, 2009). “Advanced urban marginality” develops from the ravages of capitalism and rollback neoliberalism that drive “unfit” workers into isolation and deprivation (Wacquant, 2008,

2009). Sociologist Cayce Hughes (2019) compared the experiences of African American mothers who interacted with the state for social assistance to that of nonprofits and charities, finding that people engaged in punitive behaviors in both settings. Hughes' work once again proves true the longstanding argument that African American mothers are stigmatized, scrutinized, and surveilled when enrolled in state social welfare programs, but he also shows how, similar to my findings, African American mothers reproduce class stereotypes by stigmatizing each other in soup kitchens, food pantries, and other charitable and nonprofit programs (2019).

To develop the reproductive labor of poverty, I add to debates around waiting and then describe other forms of unpaid work: uncertainty and compromising. I then tie this into the social sphere of stigmatization and judgement to show how social dynamics create further unpaid work. If we first examine the specific, unpaid social reproduction activities that poor people engage in, then, ideally, the definition of work in regard to welfare could take on a different, more comprehensive meaning and social assistance programs, such as SNAP, could be expanded to increase food access.

### **The Reproductive Labor of Poverty**

The poor people who I ate with engaged in reproductive labor as a result of both structural conditions and social implications. Structurally, poor people were tasked with waiting. Because of this waiting as well as inadequate state support, poor people consistently faced uncertainty in maintaining their own social reproduction. All of these structural conditions exist within a broader social atmosphere, fueled by stigma, requiring poor people to perform another type of reproductive labor to maintain their social status within their class.

### ***The Labor of Waiting***

*Charles, a 55-year old longtime Syracuse resident, approaches the table I'm sitting at, carrying a grocery bag of cans and walking with a purpose. After he sets his*

*bag and coat down, gets food, and comes back to the table, I ask him what he's been up to. He responds, "You know, tryna make a dollar and find me a wife." I ask how all of that is working out for him and he says, "Well, we're making progress." He tells me how he's been living at the Neighbors in Need homeless shelter recently, but will find out in two days where Neighbors in Need has placed him for housing. He says he really just wants to be able to live on his own, but he has no idea where he's going to be placed and is praying. Once Charles finishes his food, he stands up and says, "Well, Katie, I hope you have a good time with your family and keep me in your prayers that I get a good housing situation." I respond, "Thank you so much, I definitely will!"*

*The following week, Charles tells me he's been up to "a lot of the same." I can tell through Charles' body language and reactions that he is distraught over his housing situation. Last week he was so excited and optimistic, looking forward to not having to sleep in a bunk bed with several other people and to having a place of his own. This week he's pissed off. I ask him if he knew what housing situation they were trying to set up for him and if he'd be living alone and he says, "Probably so."*

*A week passes and I ask Charles how the housing situation is going. He says, "Friday. I've got a meeting on Friday." I say, "So you still haven't found out yet?" He says, "Nope, but hopefully I'm going to find out on Friday." I ask him if he's still staying at Neighbors in Need and he responds that he is. An African American man sitting next to Charles talks about how great it is to have his own place. Charles says, "Yeah, I would prefer to have a house of my own, upstairs and downstairs."*

*When I see Charles the following week, he greets me by saying, "How we doing today baby girl?!" I say, "I'm okay, how are you doing?" He says, "You know, partyin', drinkin', smokin'." Before I can even get into asking about the housing situation, he starts updating me. He says that he checked in with Neighbors in Need yesterday. "I guess they was trying to process my information to be put on a waiting list." I say, "That's interesting, they made it sound like you were supposed to have a house placement a few weeks back, not be put on a waiting list." He says, "Yeah, I don't know man. You just hurry up and wait." He chuckles, but I can tell he is pretty pissed off today. He says that he either has to wait on this housing placement or he has to find him a "rich old white woman. Honestly, whatever comes first."*

*In the weeks following, whenever I spoke with Charles, he responded with some version of, "Either I get a job or find me a rich white lady. Just being straight with*

*ya.” Whenever I asked Charles for updates on his housing situation, he says that he’s just going to keep waiting and not worry about it, since there’s nothing he can do about it.*<sup>23</sup>

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Between emergency food programs, housing shelters, and limited state support, the effective control that charitable organizations and the state have over people living in poverty is exemplified in periods of precarity, when people wait on the state or others to provide benefits. In situations like Charles’, people are “subordinated to the will of others” (Auyero, 2011, p. 24). Waiting falls within the reproductive labor of poverty because if people do not wait, they will not receive the free food from the soup kitchen, they will not receive or maintain their welfare benefits, and they will not have a place to sleep at night. Without these basic needs in place, people cannot adequately, physically reproduce themselves from day to day. As Charles’s experience illustrates, this is not the typical delay of everyday life, such as traffic congestion or long lines at the bank. It is, rather, a prolonged, paralyzing suspension of one’s life in hopes of being among the select few granted state entitlements.

In 2014, Denise took a three-day bus trip from Atlanta to Syracuse after her son, living in Syracuse, asked for support with his two children. Denise eagerly dropped what she was doing and headed north. Shortly upon arriving in Syracuse, Denise developed plantar keratosis, a foot condition that causes pain when walking. After working for at least 40 years and receiving guidance from job placement programming not to work given her foot condition, Denise decided it was time to file for social security disability income (SSDI). Denise expressed that she does not qualify for financial assistance through the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) and vaguely attributes this to her previous living situation in Atlanta. She currently

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<sup>23</sup> From here on in, italicized text signifies content taken directly from field notes.

receives \$122 per month after Public Assistance (PA) helps with her housing situation and relies fully on emergency food programs to get by.

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*Denise starts talking about how she made a mistake moving to Syracuse. She seems very sad and looks down at the table quite a bit. I ask her if she'd be interested in getting coffee sometime. Her eyes get a little wider and she smiles a very genuine smile, saying, "Why yes, I would like that." I ask her what day next week looks good for her and she says she has to go to court over her SSDI application on Monday and then has a doctor's appointment on Tuesday, but any other day would work.*

*The following week, I follow up with Denise regarding her court date and she says that she doesn't really know what's happening with that, but that the SSDI office would call her in a few days and give her more information. She says that the state owes her two years of SSDI. Rita, a friend of Denise's, explains that by the time the money is processed through welfare, the money that Denise will receive won't even come close to what she is told she's getting. Denise seems a little sad, but at the same time persistent enough to see her situation through.*

*At the next lunch, I ask Denise if she has heard back from the court regarding her SSDI situation. She says she hasn't. I ask how she's feeling and she says she's scared. Denise originally told me she should hear back from the SSDI office within a few days. I ask if there was anyone else she could call to check in with and she said she could call her lawyer but she's not sure what the lawyer would do. Denise is trying really hard to get the financial assistance she deserves, but it seems as though no one else is on Denise's team.*

*Another week has passed. I ask Denise about her SSDI and she says she still hasn't heard anything. She always looks towards the ground, pursing her lips together at the corner and sighing when she talks about her court battles. I say, "But weren't you supposed to find out within the week? Isn't that what they told you?" She says, "No, I've been talkin' to people and they said that it took them about a month." I'm not sure if Denise forgot, but I specifically remember her telling me the judge said she should know the status of her social security within the week. She tells me that she hasn't called her lawyer and she's just going to wait to hear.*

*A few weeks later, Denise hasn't received any updates on her SSDI application. She says that her lawyer told her initially that it would take about two months for her to hear back about SSDI. She tells me how she used to work two jobs but doesn't*

*think she can work anymore because of problems with her feet. She says she would go back to Atlanta in a heartbeat if she could figure her SSDI out. Denise and I still struggle to find a good time to get coffee.*

*Denise and I finally meet for coffee. I ask her what she would do if she had more money. She says that once she gets her SSDI, she wants to buy a car and go back to Atlanta. I bring up how she keeps rewriting her story about SSDI. First, she told me she'd find out in a week... then it turned into two weeks... then a month... then two to three months. I ask her how and why she has become so patient with this process. She says, "Well, my mother was always patient."*

*It has been almost two months since Denise appeared in court. I ask Denise if she has heard anything, knowing by now that we're on the same page. She knows I'm referring to her SSDI debacle and tells me she hasn't heard anything. I respond, "Oh, no." Denise says, "No, I think this is a good thing, because people are sayin' it takes about two months and that'll be in May. I think it is good I haven't heard from anyone because they need to process my information so they can give me the money." I say, "Yeah, that's a hopeful way of looking at it."*

*After a little over two months, Denise hears back from the SSDI office. Her court appearance was deemed unfavorable, but she still has the opportunity to appeal. Denise takes out the SSDI application letter without me even asking to see it. She says, "This is what came in the mail if you wanna take a look." From my understanding, the letter says that while Denise was eligible to receive SSDI, the reports from her doctors did not clearly and consistently state the severity of her three qualifying conditions: obesity, major depression disorder, and keratosis. There are statements in the letter regarding not having any medical condition that requires a prescription or hospitalization. Basically, the letter says that she needs to either give up or let things get worse before they can get better – at which point, I'd imagine, people don't even care if things get better. I say, "So, what are you going to do?" She says, "I'll give 'em what I want 'cause I want my money. They gave out SSDI on the jobs I worked and I want it." She tells me how one of her brothers fought for ten years to get his SSDI and that he had to keep applying over and over again. He didn't know that he had to stop working for a certain amount of time to receive it. I ask Denise if she feels her attorney is invested in her situation and she says that when she testified in court, the attorney barely said a word. I ask if the attorney got paid and she said no. Denise had already scheduled a meeting with her caseworker and plans to file an appeal.*

*A week has passed and Denise tells me that her attorney is no longer willing to represent her. My jaw drops. Denise looks pissed off, pursing her lips, saying, "Mhmm." I said, "So, what are you going to do? Do you still have your caseworker?" She says she has a meeting next Wednesday with the caseworker to figure out the next steps.*

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If Denise does not perform the reproductive labor of poverty, which, in this case, involves waiting for the state to respond positively to her request for SSDI, she will remain unable to afford basic needs for herself. Without adequate financial support, Denise cannot afford food and resorts to filling her cupboards with the free food from the emergency food pantry. As with that of Charles's, Denise's journey illustrates her not only waiting to know if she will receive state support, but also increases the uncertainty in her everyday life, not knowing if or when she will be able to afford food again. Whereas means testing and enforcing labor is proposed as the solution to poverty, the cumbersome nature of this system leaves the extremely poor treading water among "emergency" state and nonprofit services. This approach ensures and reproduces extreme poverty, keeping people from accessing more robust entitlements by perpetually forcing them to labor for their basic survival.

The physical act of waiting is often accompanied by uncertainty, as seen in the above fieldnotes. However, I saw that, in addition to interactions with the state, uncertainty was a byproduct of makeshift nonprofit and charitable operations throughout the neighborhood that required poor people put in additional unpaid work to understand how to access them.

At the beginning of my ethnographic research, I chose to observe interactions between workers at a mobile market in the neighborhood and their customers.<sup>24</sup> According to the

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<sup>24</sup> The fieldwork I pull from in this thesis stems from an ethnography class I took in the spring of 2018, originating with my interest in Near Westside residents' food access strategies in the wake of Nojaim's closing.



organization's webpage, the mobile market was said to visit the Near Westside once a week following a nutrition class at the doctor's office.

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*The mobile market starts in 8 minutes according to what is stated on its website, but I don't see any truck. I'm going to park closer to the entrance of the health center so that I can have a better view when the truck does arrive, wherever it does park. The parking lot used to let you enter and exit, but with the snow piled up now, cars have to squeeze through.*

*I've moved my car and the mobile market still hasn't arrived from what I can see. It is 19 degrees outside. I keep hearing cars through my windows honking to signal to their owners that they have locked.*

*I decide to turn my car on to figure out whether the truck is placed elsewhere – not in the parking lot. As I pull out of the parking lot, I notice a woman I had previously seen enter the doctor's office carrying a plastic bag with vegetables inside – potentially an onion.*

*I arrive back at my original parking spot because the truck is nowhere to be found. If class was only an hour long, then it should've been over by now. Maybe it is finishing up right now and the mobile market will be arriving soon. I am definitely noticing myself getting agitated that the truck still hasn't arrived and that I'm "people watching" at the doctor's office rather than observing or having conversations with people at the mobile market. I want to go back inside to the doctor's office because it's warm in there, but I'm going to wait it out and see if the mobile market will arrive.*

*Eventually, I decide to call to see whether the mobile market will actually be happening today. I found a number provided on the mobile market's online calendar. "Hello," a woman answers. "Hi," I shakily respond, "I was just calling to see if the mobile market is happening today at the Gifford Street location." "Yes," the woman replies, "it already started at 1:15pm." "Oh, where is it happening?" I say out of confusion. The woman directs me to the inside of one of the apartment complexes for senior citizens. As I walk over to the building, there are no signs informing where or when the mobile market is taking place.*

*When I get to the mobile market, all of the vegetables have been picked over. It's the end of the month and I couldn't find a calendar for the following month online,*

*so I ask the woman in charge. She said she's still working some details out and that the calendar would be posted soon.*

*The next month arrives with no updated calendar on the mobile market website. I decide my efforts would be better spent elsewhere.*

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My one attempt at trying to locate a mobile market in the Near Westside is illustrative of the chronic uncertainty poor people face. The poorly advertised fresh food opportunity leaves poor people with a decision: give up or work harder to figure it out. If they give up, they do not get access to more nutritious food than they would likely get at their local corner store. Uncertainty reoccurs when neoliberal charity programs choose to unexpectedly close or close for the holidays.

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*One week, Charles tells me that he didn't figure out where he was moving to and that Neighbors in Need told him he would need to wait a few weeks because of the recognized Easter holiday coming up. I apologize and acknowledge that my apology doesn't change his situation. He cocks his head to the left, looking downward and chuckling, saying, "Yeah, I know." He continues to fixate on the idea that holidays were pointless and doesn't understand why the world had to stop moving for holidays. He says, "You can feel free to celebrate whatever you want but it shouldn't mean you get to stop. We gotta keep moving." He's clearly very frustrated with the way his situation is being handled and that people could take such an important matter so lightly that they are prolonging his homelessness until after a religious holiday.*

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When it comes to holidays many of us so joyously celebrate, people like Charles are faced with more work. Facing chronic homelessness, Charles is always uncertain of where he will rest his head for the night. Where charity can provide some basic needs to supplement the social safety net, its inconsistent nature tasks poor people with more work. Without this

additional work, again, poor people will not be able to meet their basic needs or socially reproduce themselves.

### ***The Labor of Navigating Stigma***

The weakened social safety net and deficient charitable institutions require the work of waiting, uncertainty, and tradeoffs to effectively navigate them. However, the social atmosphere produced by these conditions creates a different type of work necessary for survival. At the soup kitchen, I saw that stigmatization and judgement of poor people by poor people creates an environment where people make decisions based off their peers' projected opinions. Poor people were often less apt to engage in any actions that may make them seem "less deserving" as they were always trying to isolate themselves from the broader stigmatized class. In some cases, such as Denise's, it was easier for her to remain patient and wait on the state than appear upset and possibly make a scene. Denise was able to see how residents of the Near Westside community often judged each other, telling me on many occasions how people are always gossiping and spreading rumors about each other. Denise, herself, was the target of rumors at one point. However, Denise removes herself from belonging to the narratives produced within the Near Westside by praising her neighborhood in Atlanta for having a stronger sense of community and less sense of everyone going it alone. She then told me how she feels people need to be grateful for what they are given at places such as the soup kitchen and not complain so much. Denise simultaneously identifies that stigmatizations of her class are reproduced by her own class and engages in reproducing exactly that. Even as Denise suggests that she feels stigmatized herself, she reproduces this stigma, projecting it onto others by engaging in cognitive distancing. She heightens her sense of self by acknowledging her ability to be grateful.

When Walter implied that poor decision making is a factor in someone's deservingness, I decided to pry a bit more. "Why do you think people get wrapped up in drugs and prostitution?"

I asked Walter. His reply was revealing of his own preconceived notions of poor people.

Because they're weak. They ain't have no love. They mad with the world. I'll tell you exactly why. And they try to blame everybody else for their problems. When you try to tell them what's right they go lookin' for a scapegoat. I tell 'em, "Don't bring that to me, because there ain't no scapegoat. There's right or wrong, truth or a lie. Plain and simple." I see the jail runnin' over from [ages] 16-30, they know everything, they been everywhere, but they don't wanna work.

Walter reproduces the hardworking American stereotype through his stigmatization of those around him. While Walter's personal well-being has little to do with those around him and is rooted much more in structural conditions and an evolving economy, Walter still resents those around him for not working as hard as he feels he has. "I would've given an arm and a leg to come along," Walter says, continuing on that, "A lot of my working was for mostly nothing. You know what I mean? Now you're getting paid for what you're doing and they don't have to work for 80 hours and they can't even do that." The cultural values of hard work are so rooted in Walter's mind, so much so that he feels that people need to engage in unpaid labor to prove their worth. What Walter doesn't value, like many other Americans, is the reproductive labor of poverty.

Walter is one of many poor people that engage in reproducing the culture of poverty (Lewis, 1959). During one meal, a Hispanic mother and her daughter were talking about the closing of Nojaim's. The mother, Mariah, told me how she works so hard to get food on the table, working a job when she should be on disability for back problems. She says how she follows all of the "rules." Mariah continued on to tell me how angry she was with all of the people that abuse the system and prevent it from being better for everyone. She said she couldn't understand why people don't just go out and get a job when she did it. She's very upset with

people that abuse the system that is actually helping keep her afloat. Just as Rita did, Mariah places herself above others in her own class by identifying actions that are superior to her peers, engaging in and reproducing the “pull yourself up by your bootstraps” mentality. She no longer is able to affiliate herself with other members of her class in this sense because of this distancing.

Plenty of people were quick to call others out with drug addictions or mental health problems. A white woman mentioned how people don't use their food stamps properly. When asking her what she meant, she said that people would buy things like alcohol and cigarettes by going to “big stores” like Tops or Wal-Mart, who will give you hard cash in exchange for the funds allocated on a SNAP Electronic Bank Transfer (EBT) card. In a later conversation, the same woman warned me not to go to a different emergency food program because it's “where all of the drug addicts go.” One day I was bringing Rita to a doctor's appointment. As we walked to my car, parked down the block, she says, “You parked all the way down there near the crack heads?” When I said, “Yes, is that a bad idea?” she quickly responded, “You gotta be careful where you parking.” Another time, I waited with Denise and Rita inside a bus stop while they smoked a cigarette. They started talking about how a father in their apartment complex has two children under the age of 18 living with him and not attending school. Rita said she hadn't seen the kids go to school in two or three weeks. “That's illegal, you know,” Rita continued. They both told me how oftentimes parents who are involved in drug dealing or do drugs don't let their children go to school, because when they do go to school they tend to share stories that are too detailed, such as telling their teachers that their parents smoke marijuana. They told me that teachers use opportunities for student reflection as ways to know what's going on at home and then direct social services to their doorstep. As Ange-Marie Hancock (2004) states in *The Politics of Disgust: The Public Identity of the Welfare Queen*, “The individual who is tied to a

particular public identity is often challenged to change herself or risk further isolation and suppression in a context where the opportunity for change is limited by structural considerations” (p. 17). People of stigmatized groups are constantly finding ways to remove themselves from the stereotypes projected onto them in an effort to reduce such isolation or further oppression.

As quick as people were to judge others for their actions, they wasted no time contradicting themselves. Moments after Rita told me she doesn’t like to complain in the narrative above, she took a sip of her coffee and said, “This shit don’t even have sugar.” On multiple occasions, Rita tried to recruit me to get additional desserts for her. The week before Easter, Rita ordered me to go get candy and bring it back to give to her. At the time I wasn’t eating lunch at the soup kitchen, so she used me as a proxy to get more food. The week after Easter, Rita similarly demanded I go get her a pack of Peeps, a sugary marshmallow candy, even though she already had a grocery bag full of them. Rita was comfortable using me as a tool to get more food because she herself was not physically reproducing the ungrateful, selfish stereotype she constantly reproduces.

Beyond the physical act of waiting are social interactions that further complicate living in poverty and require additional labor to navigate. These intricate social relations are often overlooked, yet they are imperative in understanding the reproductive labor of poverty. Without acknowledging the social relations that are produced from an inadequate social welfare system, we dismiss the opportunity to understand how and why poor people make choices and instead reproduce dominant narratives surrounding poverty and welfare in America.

## **Conclusion**

In 2019, Sarah Bowen, Sinikka Elliot, and Joslyn Brenton released their findings from a multiyear ethnography of over 100 low-income families to illustrate the tradeoffs people are

forced to make when their social safety net fails them. “At a minimum,” Bowen et al. (2019) state, “it takes a working stove and enough money to pay the electric bill to run the stove. Poor families... are sometimes forced to make difficult choices: pay the electric bill or the rent? Buy groceries or pay a medical bill?” (p. 4). I witnessed something similar.

As each month came to a close, the food line at the soup kitchen lengthened, demonstrating both the lack of adequate SNAP benefits distributed at the beginning of the month and the limited impact of food pantries. People stockpiled food in mobile carts to bring home to their families, even bringing in plastic ware on occasion to store additional food. Some people took their paper plates of food to go so that they could get enough sleep before their next shift at work. As the examples from the soup kitchen illustrate, people living in poverty are presented with the chronic job of making it work.

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*Joey, a man who recently got out of jail, is at the soup kitchen again. Joey quit his job at a steel factory once he learned that drug dealing was much more profitable. I later ask him where he works, and he says he’s “looking” right now. He then tells me that he’s enrolled in a drug and alcohol abuse program and is on parole. Joey says he isn’t able to accept employment until he completes a certain amount of the drug and alcohol abuse program. I ask him if the state or county government is providing any financial support until he is able to get a job and he says that Public Assistance will kick in after he’s been out of jail for 45 days. Joey has fourteen days left. I say, “So, right now you’re not making any money, but the government wants you to successfully stay out of jail? Or do they want you to end up back in jail?” Joey says, “They don’t care what happens to me... They’ve definitely put me to the test.” The only crutch Joey appears to have is informally selling cigarettes.*

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Evidently enough, Joey’s work history that eventually led to his incarceration is indicative of the lack of adequate employment today. Because of this, Joey became a regular soup kitchen attendee and recipient of charity as a means for survival when he was cut from the

social safety net. While Joey waits for the state to re-acknowledge his own humanity, he has to partake in the informal economy and depend on charity.

When Charles isn't spending time trying to figure out where he can rest his head, he's picking up cans. After the annual St. Patrick's Day parade in Syracuse, an oasis for bottle and can collectors, Charles exclaimed, "I was in and out. Just a few minutes and I made fifty dollars!" Charles has been unemployed for years because of mental health issues, but he still has to make money somehow. Even though he hasn't received adequate services to address his health nor his housing, he still engages in unpaid work to be able to afford at least some of his basic needs.

People frequently asked me for money for prescription copayments and bus rides. Rita, a senior citizen with a rather tough and blunt personality, revealed to me that she had been diagnosed with lung cancer only after my insistent questions regarding her health. When I ask how far the lung cancer has progressed, Rita responds that, "I don't know. If you believe in the diagnosis, then you worry about it. If you don't believe it, then you don't worry about it... You got a dollar? I have to ride the bus today for my [radiation] appointment, but I usually [am able to] get a ride home." Rita's use of "usually" suggests that this method of work is nothing new to her. In the moment, Rita had to prioritize figuring out her mode transportation over worrying about the disease itself.

A former steelworker injured on the job in his early 20s now struggles to pay rent each month. When I sat down with Walter at a nearby coffee shop, he made it clear that, based on his health history, he is not getting adequate support from the state:

I get tired of scuffling from one month to the other. But there ain't no way out for me, because my income ain't gonna change. The only way out for me [is to get] another subsidized place and that's gonna take time because some [places] have three to five year long waiting lists. And can't no poor person afford that. Now



they've got places you can go, but you've gotta pay unsubsidized costs. So, who can afford that? Poor people can't afford that. I retired a long time ago – I had no choice. My income ain't that much. After I pay [electric], my rent, and buy me a little food, [my money] is gone 'til the next month. And, you know, I be scuffling like that... It take everything I got. And then I gotta get a little food, I gotta scuffle some time to pay National Grid. And I do the best I can. I don't drink, I don't smoke, I don't go nowhere, honey. And when I do, sometimes I get on the bus and ride to the mall just to look around, but I can't buy nothin. And uh, you know, just to keep from gettin' so bored. Can't do nothing that I'd like to do...

Walter hints at his confusion and resentment as he speaks about his personal behaviors. Walter doesn't smoke or drink, insinuating that, by not engaging in such activities, he feels he's more deserving of a better life than others, internalizing problematic class stereotypes. He feels as though he's done everything right and resents those around him who he believes are making poor choices. Walter scuffles, but in doing so, he wastes no time judging his neighbor's actions against his own.

Poor people should not have to make such compromises merely because they are poor. My research findings aim to broaden the discussion around how we view work, specifically the work of poor people. The waiting poor people are chronically tasked with needs to be brought to the attention of those who have the privilege of advocating for a stronger welfare system. In addition to these material actions are the broader, less tangible social dynamics that often reproduce stigma and judgement. I argue that, through a theorization of how poor people engage in reproductive labor through both waiting and navigating stigma supplemented by the lived experiences of Near Westside residents, policymakers can redirect the conversation around SNAP and other social welfare programs. Rather than exoticizing poor people and their experiences, viewing these symptoms of poverty through the lens of work illustrates poor people's "deservingness" and strengthens arguments for increased state support of social welfare programs such as SNAP and WIC. Moreover, a reproductive labor framework could begin to

bridge the disconnect between food access practitioners' intended goals and actual on-the-ground efforts. By highlighting the many other pressing concerns poor people navigate on a daily basis and the hard work that goes into navigating these challenges could redirect approaches in fields of public health and food access from being rooted in individual change to structural change.

## VIII. CONCLUSION

As I wrote this, people, many of whom were Syracuse residents, asked me, “So, what caused Nojaim’s to close?” Amid speculation and nuances, Syracuse residents are so interested in a definitive answer and a definitive party at fault. I can sympathize with the relief of receiving a concrete answer in a society that is facing uncertainty and dismay on many levels, whether with climate change or the political climate we are currently in. Sometimes, in the absence of such certainty, having a concrete answer is all we need. Yet, as I have illuminated within various chapters, the answer is not simple, it is not definitive, and no single party is at fault. On the surface this may appear disappointing. However, if we take the time to better understand the several political and economic factors at play in the demise of Nojaim’s, we can hopefully avoid a similar outcome in the future. It will require residents, practitioners, scholars, and politicians each to pull back from their own agenda, listen to all viewpoints, and openly accept criticism.<sup>25</sup>

The fall of Nojaim’s can be traced back to a series of historical processes over the course of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Nojaim’s came to fruition at a time when independent grocery stores were either being bought out or driven out of business by chain grocery stores. The invention of the supermarket model created an increasingly precarious economic landscape for independent and chain grocery stores that were eventually banished from competitively buying and selling goods. Disinvestment through redlining and urban renewal left city residents with little resources and declining economic development prospects. After the turn of the century, Paul Nojaim began adapting tactics to keep the store afloat. Through home delivery services, in-store butchers,

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<sup>25</sup> If time and resources had allowed, I would’ve better broken down the personal relations at play throughout the fall of Nojaim’s as well as the rise of PriceRite to understand how personal politics often distract from or contribute to the problem.

banking and phone services, large selections of Hispanic foods, and clearly labeled WIC items, Paul Nojaim did his best to meet his customer base where they were at financially.

Once the obesity epidemic gained national attention from Michelle Obama's *Let's Move!* Campaign in 2010, Paul became adamant in adopting practices to combat these public health issues within his own store, out of . Theorized by public health practitioners as an issue that could be solved by altering the "built environment," prefabricated solutions include improving sidewalks and parks to encourage physical activity while increasing food access through either grocery stores or corner stores. This solution promotes food desert logic, where increasing the number of grocery stores and corner stores should increase food access but has been implemented by public health practitioners in ways that paternalize the poor through incentivizing "healthy" food purchasing in grocery stores and corner stores. Through partnerships with Syracuse University's Lerner Center for Public Health Promotion and the Near Westside Initiative, Paul began implementing public health-deemed food access solutions that encouraged and incentivized Nojaim's customers to eat healthier. A partnership with a Near Westside doctor's office further incentivized healthy eating for Near Westside residents who are diabetic. Paul's choice to "nudge" people towards making healthier choices is exemplary of broader trends of neoliberal paternalism, where people are provided individualized solutions to problems that are rooted in structures and systems, not in the individual.

Over the last two decades, supermarkets and large corporations normalized food desert logic as the dominant way of understanding urban food access. Food deserts, in theory, restrict everyday people, planners, and policy makers from viewing food access as a more than a physical act. Areas with high poverty rates and no grocery stores are considered food deserts because people who are poor are assumed to have limited transportation options and, thus, would

need a grocery store located within walking distance from their home. The illustrative ability of the food desert concept to convey the dire need for increased resources in an underserved neighborhood has captured the hearts of nonprofits, foundations, public health scholars, and politicians. In Syracuse, this was the case for a nonprofit, Jubilee Homes, that used the food desert concept to successfully garner both resident and public support for a grocery store in a neighborhood that had been void of physical food access for decades. The grocery store, PriceRite, however, will take home the biggest victory. Community support for a grocery store as a solution to food access is indicative of the success of mass corporations in programming how everyday people view food access.

The community-supported project to get a grocery store was widely accepted by politicians at each the municipal, county, and state level. Such public funding was the “nail in the coffin” for Nojaim’s. While I have argued they could have been far more in-depth in their assessment of what the neighborhood actually needed, acknowledging the undergirding structures and systems that create food access and taking into account nearby businesses, it is clear that many politicians used the funding of PriceRite as a way to garner support from Black and Latino residents in the historically underserved Southside.<sup>26</sup>

Understanding how different subsets of scholars, practitioners, and politicians viewed the absence of Nojaim’s allowed me to understand how people are (or are not) thinking about food access. People I interviewed were quick to suggest the next best solution for the Near Westside, often prescribing approaches that would reproduce the neoliberal paternalistic tactics of reforming the eating behaviors of the poor. When I asked about the challenges that Near Westside residents face on a daily basis, people were more inclined to speak about the need for

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<sup>26</sup> See Figures 17 and 18 in Chapter 5.

employment opportunities and Near Westside-based economic development. The disconnect between food access and poverty was clear. In Syracuse, practitioners argue they are doing work in the realm of food justice, but progress will not come until practitioners acknowledge the structures and systems limiting food access and advocate for structural change rather than temporary, surface fixes.

As scholars, we need to step back from the endless critiques of food deserts to better understand the importance and nuances of grocery stores. Capturing Nojaim's uniqueness as an independent grocer that persisted for 98 years through an unfavorable economic landscape makes important contributions to debates around embeddedness, urban food access, and poverty. It unveils a reality in which a loyal yet working class customer base was forced to shop elsewhere with cheaper food so that they can continue to focus on the more pressing issues in their lives, such as paying rent or buying their children winter jackets.

At the outset, I did not imagine that researching the closure of a local grocery store would lead me down a path of advocating for increased entitlements on behalf of people living in extreme poverty. In October 2019, I stopped back at the soup kitchen to see how everyone was doing. After I finished formally taking field notes, I couldn't help but occasionally check in to see whether Denise ever got her SSDI, whether Rita's cancer went into remission, or whether Charles found a permanent place to rest his head. As I walked to the side door where everyone lines up to wait, Mark and Denise were there with their backs against the wall, waiting patiently in the sunshine. Rita, per usual, was walking around, talking to each and every person she knew. After we hugged, got our food, and sat down to eat, I asked my questions. Charles no longer consistently comes to the soup kitchen. Denise's foot condition has worsened and she's yet to re-apply for SSDI after being denied twice. Rita is still undergoing chemotherapy while she lives in

a building with no air condition in the summer and lack of heat in the winter. Yet, they all “scuffle” just enough to stay afloat. Until dominant conceptions of poverty shift so that all people living in America are seen to be more than workers in a capitalist society, the scuffling will continue. In the meantime, one path forward is to use the conservative language of work and deservingness to argue how recipients of state support *are* working day in and day out. They *are* doing their best.

Without a comprehensive understanding of poverty, food access will not be adequately addressed. We need to take the time to understand the political and economic context of a given situation before jumping right in with haphazard and superficial fixes. We must listen critically to the needs of poor people and engage in reflexivity as we think through solutions. If we do not, the forest of uplifted arms will continue to thicken, reaching up to grasp all but the pathway to the glade, where sunlight peers through, offering first solace and then ease.

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<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.healthplace.2014.07.011>

**KATHERINE LOUISA MOTT**klmott@syr.edu | (315)886-9902 | Syracuse, NY**EDUCATION**

December 2019

M.S. in Food Studies, Syracuse University

Advisor: Evan Weissman

May 2015

B.S. with Honors in Environmental Resources Engineering, State University of New York College of Environmental Science and Forestry (SUNY-ESF), 3.50 GPA

**PUBLICATIONS**

**Mott, Katherine.** 2019. “Lotta Food, No Money”: Syracuse’s Poor Have Challenges that are Much Bigger than Food Access. *Lerner Center Research Brief Series*. Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Lerner Center for Public Health Promotion.

Holt-Gimenez, Eric and **Katherine Mott.** 2016. Ground Shaking? Assessing the FAO’s 2015 International Year of Soils. *Food First Backgrounder, Vol 22(1)*. Oakland, CA: Food First/The Institute for Food and Development Policy.

**PROFESSIONAL EXPERIENCE****Operations Assistant***July 2019-Present*

Greater Syracuse H.O.P.E., Syracuse, NY

- Manage programming efforts for eleven subcontractors funded through New York State Empire State Poverty Reduction Initiative (ESPRI) grant
- Provide data analytics and visualizations for all programming efforts

**Graduate Research Fellow***September 2018-May 2019*

Lerner Center for Public Health Promotion, Center for Policy Research, Syracuse University

- Conduct and analyze research related to food access and population health disparities
- Disseminate personal research findings in the form of publicly accessible briefs
- Collaborate with community partners and campus organizations on health initiatives

**Graduate Teaching Assistant***September 2017-May 2019*

Department of Food Studies, Falk College of Sport and Human Dynamics, Syracuse University

- Aid in facilitating lecture and discussions, grading assignments and exams, and assisting students during office hours and by appointment outside of lecture
- Courses taught: Labor in the Food System (FST 310); Feeding the World: Global Agriculture (FST 307); Feeding the City: Urban Food Systems (FST 402)

**Water Resources Engineer***January 2016-August 2018*

Arcadis, Syracuse, NY

- Designed green stormwater infrastructure features for the Philadelphia Water Department to combat effects of combined sewer overflow in Philadelphia, PA
- Trained new project members in fundamental concepts as well as computer aided drafting

- Managed tasks, schedules, and budgets of green stormwater infrastructure projects

### **Research, Writing and Development Intern**

*Fall 2015*

Food First/Institute for Food and Development Policy, Oakland, CA

- Conducted literature reviews and developed a research brief regarding major food policy initiatives, agricultural practices, and investigative reports
- Coordinated fundraising events and other programming

### **Research Intern**

*Summer 2014*

Soil For Life, Cape Town, Western Cape, South Africa

- Assisted trainers in informal settlements with home gardening program training sessions
- Developed soil-related educational materials for home gardening program participants
- Conducted soil analyses for several home gardeners and Soil For Life property

## **CONFERENCE PRESENTATIONS**

- Mott, Katherine. “‘Lotta food, no money’: Precarity Beyond Food Access.” Joint Annual Meeting of the Agriculture, Food, and Human Values Society and the Association for the Study of Food and Society. June 2018.
- Mott, Katherine. “An Analysis of the Closing of Nojaim Brothers Supermarket in the Near Westside Neighborhood of Syracuse, NY: Initial Findings.” Northeast Sustainable Agriculture Working Group Annual Meeting. Baltimore, MD. October 2017.
- Mott, Katherine and Doug Daley. “Fire as a Forcing Function in Ecological Restoration.” New York Water Environment Association, Inc. – Central New York Chapter Annual Meeting. Skaneateles, NY. April 2015.
- Mott, Katherine. “From the Ground Up: Diminishing Food Security Issues through Sustainable Soil Practices.” American Society of Agronomy, Crop Science Society of America, and Soil Science Society of America Annual Meeting, Long Beach, CA. November 2014.

## **SKILLS**

ATLAS.ti, ArcMap/ArcGIS Online, Adobe InDesign/Illustrator, Tableau, Google Suite, Qualtrics, SPSS, Microsoft Office Suite, R/MatLab/Python, AutoCAD Civil3D, Social Media Platforms

## **GRANTS & AWARDS**

- Syracuse University Falk College Graduate Assistantship (2017-2019)
- Syracuse University Maxwell School of Citizenship and Public Affairs Graduate Fellowship (2018-2019)
- Engineer in Training Certification (2015)
- Robin Hood Oak Award, graduating senior who has made outstanding contributions to SUNY-ESF and general public (2015)
- Rosen Undergraduate Fellowship (2014)
- SUNY Undergraduate STEM Research Scholarship (2014-15)